

ALL OF BARBARA

Barbara remembered a cautionary tale her father once told her. It is one of those five-year-old's memories that are mysteriously brighter and more intricate than anything acquired since. She heard it around the time the family was preparing to move to Flushing, deeper into the city, for her father's law practice. Uneasy, she had crawled into bed with them and pushed her way in between her parents and pulled the covers over her head.

Papa, tell me story.

Let me see, her father said. He yawned. Once upon a time there was ... a woman. Let's make it about a woman, all right?

All right, tiny Barbara said, her voice muffled by the bed covers.

Once upon a time there was a woman whose name was Josephine.

Is it Josephine that works for the phone company?

It could be, Squib. Let's say it is. So you've already met Josephine?

Pheen!

Well then. In that case, let's call her Barbara. Barbara worked for the telephone company. She was a security code. She carried messages back and forth, and reported on the condition of the wires and switches, and helped to make important decisions. She got to do a lot of traveling (on company business, you see) and wherever she went she carried a lot of numbers in her bag. A great many numbers — too many to say in bed, in the dark. Ten to the jigundus gigundus. And when she came back, if any one of those numbers was a bit dusty or dog-eared, or missing, or anything at all, then Barbara knew that something was wrong and she would sit

down immediately, without even a cup of coffee, and figure out what it was and what to do about it.

That was Barbara's job.

She loved it.

She wanted it never to end.

Well one day Barbara was sent away, far away to a place where there were no telephone wires. She had never been to such a place before. But Barbara, you see, was very good at keeping secrets. This was a place where there were a lot of secrets because there was a war going on. The secrets were getting away. Barbara was supposed to fix that.

In this place it was hot and crowded and sweaty and there were not enough bathrooms. Before, she had lived in a big airy house and traveled alone, in the fastest airplanes, everywhere in the world. She had even been to the Moon, and to Mars. Now she lived in a stuffy hovel and traveled on foot or in old trains with poor farmers and chickens and only as far as the mountains and back.

This was Barbara's job.

She hated it.

She wanted it to end immediately. Right now.

She missed her old friends, of course. They never wrote her one letter. Barbara told herself this was because they never wrote to anyone. Then she thought it was because of the secrets, and their letters were not being let through. Finally she knew her old friends weren't really, and had forgotten her.

Days and days. No letters. No picture post cards. Not even a smoke signal.

One time, in the mountains of that awful place to which her father had sent her, Barbara found an old radio. It was so old she didn't recognize it at first. Just some wires taped to a board and a signal key. She tried sending some messages but there was no reply.

At that time there was a routine to her life: their ene-

mies would find them in the mountains and the planes would come with bombs and Barbara and her new friends would have to move. After a couple of weeks their enemies would find them again. This went on and on. Every time, Barbara would walk all night through the forest carrying a heavy load of supplies, always including the useless old radio. At dawn it would begin to rain. Cold water would drip from the big leaves of unfamiliar trees. The red earth would be slippery underfoot. Barbara began to miss the city below, in the plain, and the slow trains and the chickens and the heat.

Then the planes began to come at night. They dropped their bombs in the dark. When the sun came up the camp was gone, just red dirt ploughed up by the bombs and shattered tree stumps and shreds of tent cloth and dead people on which the cold rain began to fall.

Barbara let her pack of belongings fall into the mud. She sat down on a splintered crate and covered her face.

I didn't like that story, Barbara said, her tiny voice tinier than ever.

Well, Squib, it's a true story nevertheless. Now back to your own bed. I'll try to do better next time.



Barbara Scoppone graduated in the spring without the least idea of what she wanted to do next. Four years of college — five, actually — had soured her adolescent enthusiasm a bit. Barbara was a smart woman and she now found the world a little slow — and being slow, obtuse, and being obtuse, inclined to bad behavior. A slow, obtuse, badly-behaved world did not seem very promising.

So the question was, what to do now. What does a hundred fifty credits in pre-law make possible? What opportunities, and did she want them?

She did not. The idea of sitting for the law school exam

turned her stomach. Once it had seemed that lawyering would be the means of... well, various earnest long-faced things. More likely a practice would be a cynical accommodation, likely to breed a creeping rot.

Young Ms. Scoppone, twenty-two, assesses herself and her chances. Traditionally this is done naked, before a mirror, but Ms Scoppone has spent too many hours that way already, in twenty-two years, and prefers to take the number seven train into Manhattan and walk around in Central Park instead. An inventory of physical condition is positive. She has a good figure but already running to fat and no more than five years to trade on it. Scoppone sits on a grassy knoll and watches the runners, notes the tight bodies and the whipping ponytails. The smell of sweat coats the breeze.

An inventory of intellectual advantages is less encouraging. From where she sits, on the right is the Met; on the left, the university. But Scoppone knows herself to be lazy — why else settle for a generic B.S. from a nowhere place? She is hard to get up in the morning.

Young Ms. Scoppone takes the number four train down to Washington Square. She looks for a decent chess game to kibbitz, sits on a bench on the west side, in the afternoon shade, and watches the mixed crowd of suits, whacked out underfed men, and rickety hip-hop kids circulate around the closed track. Her inventory of social skills is encouraging: she has networking skills and a taste for many acquaintances and few friends. People talk to her on the bus, tell her stories, even ask advice which she is too sharp to give them. She has no off-putting bad habits, and though she has bohemian tastes she isn't likely to embarrass any useful people with them by accident. She is in control.

A light dinner, another train across the river to Brooklyn Heights where she can sit at a sidewalk table with an espresso and look at the Chrysler and its friends, window-speckled

and black in the mellow evening light, or downtown toward the old fish market and the stock exchange. It is a good place to consider economic prospects. These are less satisfactory. She has some money but her employability is low and she has a settled distaste for offices and anything which pays by the hour. Her loyalty is likely to be poor and after a few years of that her resumé will be hard to explain. On the other hand there is that five-year window of her looks on which she is not averse to trade.

The next day she makes her way out to Fire Island beach and sits for a long time with the ocean sucking her toes and refusing to succumb to cosmic thinking. She requires a cosmopolitan place. She has no further tolerance for cold and darkness. She wants good food and late nights and decent sex, not too frantic or frequent and not always on top.



A week into June she borrows some money from her parents and takes a flight to Key West. She finds a share in a cottage on Catherine Street and part-time jobs in a law clinic and a counseling center and one night a week volunteering on a suicide help line. She buys a new wardrobe of straw hats, loose shirts, white shorts and sandals, and a bicycle, and tacks a note to her doorframe to remember the water bottle, the sunscreen, and the chapstick.

It was a good choice. She is content.

But things go wrong. Her bicycle is stolen. She buys another. That is stolen. She walks or takes the circular tourist tram. A woman propositions her in a bar and turns abusive when turned down. She is followed home early one morning but the potential stalker doesn't reappear and nothing comes of it. Her flatmate goes home to Minnesota and leaves her with the rent. The refrigerator dies and a lot of bad-smelling food has to be thrown out. She is robbed on the street for

drug money and gets two black eyes. She picks up an interesting straight guy but he won't use a condom so she has to squelch home and take a shower. Someone on the suicide help line actually does commit suicide and for a week she is too strung out to work. The lawyers understand but the counseling center is short-handed and the social worker has a hissy fit. Despite her repugnance for the work she takes a job waiting on tables to replace the counseling center income. The customers grope her and she only lasts a week. There is a lean period after that, but the counseling center eventually takes her back. Right away there is an OD in the office. 911 is a little slow and the medics are not too sympathetic but at least the guy doesn't die right on the floor. She tells the woman at the opposite desk about her suicide. That seems to help. An old lady turns up at the law clinic and makes a pest of herself for a week and Scoppone loses her objectivity. One of the lawyers has to take Scoppone out. It seems this old woman turns up periodically and has managed to annoy everyone, which seems to be her purpose, so it's all right. But it isn't.

You seem a little tense, the lawyer says. There is a lawyer joke on his t-shirt which no one gets except him.

Scoppone tells him what has happened since that girl died on the telephone. She wonders whether this lawyer would use a condom. It turns out that like almost everyone else he is gay so he probably does but then it doesn't matter.

She gets a summer cold and then another one. It rains every afternoon. She forgets the sunblock and gets a terrible burn, mostly on her ass and can't sit down which everyone but her thinks is hilarious. She gets her white shorts bloody and has to throw them out. At least she figures out what to do before she gets heatstroke and dies. She picks up that same guy but he's hopeless. He's not going to get old, anyway, she thinks.

By the time winter comes on Barbara Scoppone is tak-

ing stock. It has been a tough start, she has to admit. She is inclined to resent this and to feel singled out. But on balance it's still worth it. At Christmas her parents fly down and actually have a good time. They stay in a hotel because there is no place for them in the cottage. Her mother says they would have slept on the floor like they once did which is a confidence Barbara has not heard before. They visit the Hemingway house while Barbara is at work and at night they eat pizza and grouper and her father goes along to the suicide phone and looks grave. At the airport there is a three-way hug and Barbara is so elated she considers walking home. After New Year's her mother writes to say they are proud of what she is doing.

The second summer she takes stock again. If she were not living here in Key West which she really likes but in some awful gray place it would have been a pretty bad year, but it was not. She wonders why there are so many gray places and for the first time begins to reflect on the country she lives in and is glad she doesn't live in it.



Then the hurricane comes and for a while Key West is gray like everywhere else. The old residents say this happens all the time, it's like shoveling snow in Minnesota, and they get out the plywood from last time. There is a run on the grocery stores but everyone stands in line politely exchanging pleasantries about what each other thinks it is important to have in the pantry. One man has a shopping cart full of baked beans. Fresh fruit is not very popular.

For several days Barbara and her new flatmate watch the hurricane build up in the Atlantic to the east. Perhaps it will turn north and mess up the Outer Banks instead which is not very gracious. Still, these things never go to Brazil, do they?

However, the storm wants to get into the Gulf and after a

few days it's obvious they are going to batten down.

Not long after that the wind starts to pick up and then the raindrops are hitting the house like bullets and then the electricity goes out. They have candles and a Sterno stove; the candles won't stay lit in the draft but they rig a shelter and manage to heat up a couple of packaged dinners. Barbara wants to go up to her room for some different clothes but everyone says this is a bad idea and she ought to stay away from the windows because you never know what might come crashing through. A chair, a dog, a length of pipe.

At the height of the storm, while the eye of it is passing to the south, Barbara gets claustrophobic. She has to go out. This is not a good idea either, her flatmate tells her, but Barbara is getting tired of being cooped up with this person who has nothing intelligent to say and she goes out anyway.

The wind tears at her and the rain hurts. Still, it isn't much worse than a winter storm off the lake in that other place. If she can get along William Street without being killed by a piece of debris or squashed by an uprooted tree she will be able to see out into the Gulf and this she very much wants to do. She doesn't give any more thought to how she is going to get back than Honoria Dedlock did. It crosses her mind that this is not a very intelligent attitude but just now prudence does not seem to be the virtue called for.

At the bottom of William Street the beach is occupied by resorts so she goes right on South Street which turns her into the face of the wind. Her nylon squall jacket balloons out like a Krispy Kreme. Although it isn't that cold her bare legs are numb. She has to keep her eyes on her feet because she can't face up to the wind which means she can't see where she is going. Palm fronds blow by silently because her ears are now full of water. The fronds' fans slice at her clothes and skin and the other, heavy, end might break her leg. Several times she loses her footing and stumbles, once into a picket fence which she knocks flat, piercing the fat of her

hand on a nail. But she pushes on and eventually reaches a place where she can see a length of coast.

There is too much water in the air to see any distance. The ordinarily placid Gulf is raging, tearing at the land, at the string of islands which pierce its side.

This was what she wanted to see. To see the angry waves coming in, the sea livid and heaving, the wind breaking down trees and smashing up beachfront geegaws, sky and water swirling, indistinguishable, like some amniotic smoothie.

Now it is obvious, just for a moment glimpsed through the rack during a momentary lull, what is the truth of this life she is living. She is going to be scraped away by these uncaring — no, not uncaring, but mindless forces, which from her limited point of view amounts to the same thing. She is a little person who if storms and fires and plagues are struggling among themselves for mastery, is too little to see what is going on. She is not in the way of these forces. She is part of them, one of the grains of sand which is being used to wear away all the solid things of the world. She stands on a planet which is itself one of the solid things and will itself be scraped clean in time to drift, again a lifeless rock, toward its frozen nemesis. By then it will have been dark — way past gray — for untold eons, all the suns burned out, all their homeless photons dead.

The wheel will continue to turn. In some other universe of an infinity of universes, like a flea surveying untold riches of opportunity, she will be reborn. Reborn probably in the middle of another war of red mud and night-time bombs and cold rain.

But she has learned something, has Ms Scoppone.

Scrape the earth clean, damn you! she shouts at the destroying army of waves which claws at the battlements. It's what we deserve, damn you! Go ahead! But I'll be the last to go.

In the coming years, if there are years which will come

to her, she will be a little embarrassed at this rather gothic outburst. But she is young, is Ms. Scoppone. Already she has wounds, and scars, but she is right to struggle. She can see through the wall of rain with what might be done and she is right to damn anything which might get in her way. She is not here to be happy but to live. She will not live, of course. One of the things she has learned is that to imagine home is to invent homelessness. It is inevitable that she will be driven into the street in some foreign place, unable even to ask for help in this language made up of varied groans and incomprehensible scribbles, to die in a cardboard box, covered in rags, cold and alone, old and ugly, too feeble to wipe herself.

Go ahead, damn you! she shouts, enraged, into the all-scouring wind. It's what we deserve! But I'm staying. I'll be the last to go.

Of course nobody hears her.