
SEAN PRENTISS

MAJESTIC MARY OF THE SLATE BELT

I.

During the middle of this December night (at a time when dawn—and its diffused light—seems as if it might never arrive), Mary rolls away from her husband of fifteen years and toward the cold edge of their bed. In this moment (a moment where Mary is neither dreaming nor awake), Mary remembers a time when her husband called her his *majestic Mary*. Those days were so long ago. Back then, her husband used to hold Mary so tightly through every night (every hour) they could steal away from her parents (his never cared). He'd whisper in her ear, *My majestic Mary* over and over and over again.

Those days (and her husband's gentle nickname for her) were so many years ago (or entire lives, it now seems). Back during those high school days, Mary and her future-husband would stand on creaking wooden bleachers and watch high school classmates suicidally run into each other on those crabgrass football fields. Mary would lean into her future husband's chest while he fed her warm peanuts or Italian pie in the November chill.

After football games, Mary and her future-husband would drive winding back roads just to dream of where they could travel once they were free of school and parents and this sad town. Or, or, or—all those things and things and things, Mary thinks as she falls back into a restless sleep (still a few more hours until morning) filled with dreams that others might call nightmares.

II.

It is the thinnest of dawns (the sky a watery black) and Mary is slowly waking to an incessant alarm that her husband never hears. Mary peels herself from beneath her grandmother's quilt and climbs from the bed, leaving two things behind—her husband (and his deep unemployment) and the warmth from where her body lay (soon enough, that warmth will be gone, only the husband will remain).

In the dark, Mary dresses—her work clothes (jeans and a thick sweatshirt) are cold against legs and chest and arms. Walking down the narrow hallway, Mary peers in on the three sleeping children. Each in the tight curl of a question mark in their small beds. Their pile of blankets is not enough to keep out the chill from old windows rattling from the winter wind roiling over the dark Kittatinny hills, nor against the heat turned low—the high prices of oil and unemployment this winter.

Mary dreams of climbing into bed beside her children (to warm their bodies, to ease their dream-twitches). She'd rest her ear next to their little (and perfect) mouths and listen to their dream-murmurs. But Mary is so afraid of what she'll hear (even if they are only children).

Mary closes the doors to the children's bedrooms and then the heavier front door as she steps into the bruise-black morning. The ice thick and dangerous on the front steps. The driveway covered in a gray snow that looks as if the nearby cement plants coughed and hacked over this landscape.

Thick clouds (steel colored) blanket this town from one horizon to the other. Leafless trees appear like standing skeletons and they allow Mary to gaze into the distance (farther than she had ever hoped to see).

Mary climbs into her car, and on the third try, the Ford Fairmont catches and sputters. No need to see if the Windstar's transmission can find first gear today. Mary backs the car from the driveway and heads toward Majestic Garment Factory where she has worked fifteen years (since she married and they bought this house). Mary thinks, *An eternity ago. An entire eternity.*

III.

Through this dawn, Mary steers away from her small town, passing the abandoned slate quarries that litter her hills. Once (long before Mary was born) these quarries fed and clothed and housed this region, which is still known as the Slate Belt. But those days of riches brought from the earth were so long ago that they seem more like myth than history.

The quarries shut down decades before Mary was born. Since then, the massive quarries have filled with water, forming deep and dark artificial lakes. But, Mary, she remembers (and remembers) the quarries as places to skinny-dip with high school boys—her husband and all the other boys. During hot July nights they swam naked as the sky exploded with a million stars (one for every dream and hope) and (if Mary and the boys were lucky) shooting stars heading toward oblivion.

All those boys were so beautiful (with skin wrapped so tightly against rust belt muscles). Their boy faces were not yet scarred by, well, by all the things that scar a life here (*Everything? Mary questions, Everything?*). The low price of corn. The disease of cows. The slate quarries long ago emptied of everything of value, now just echoing lakes. Bethlehem Steel shuttered for decades. The Formica factory only an empty building. The cement factory just gone.

Mary thinks about how she was beautiful during those quarry days. Thin legs and tight breasts and strong shoulders and indented hips. She whispers the word (*Beautiful*) as if it's a word she's just learned the meaning to, as if it's a word she's never said before (not even once). Mary whispers the word again (*Beautiful*) and again (*Beautiful*) just to see the fog this word makes in the winter cold of her car. Just to watch that small huff of fog disappear into the dark air of the car.

IV.

Still fifteen minutes (or an eternity) from Majestic Garment Factory, Mary runs her thumbs over every nick and cut on every finger (her hands were once so soft). Mary recalls dancing her fingertips across her husband's chest (when he was just a boy). She

used to write “I love you” across his chest. She used to write “Forever” across his back. She’d make him guess her words. She’d make him plead.

Now Mary counts on her fingers what she and her husband have—a row home, a desperate mortgage, three kids, a minivan (with a blown transmission), this Fairmont (and its faulty starter). That is seven things. Not even enough to fill all ten fingers.

Mary thinks, as the quarries disappear from sight, as she enters the dark part of the drive, *I should have kissed the children goodbye.*

V.

At Majestic Garment Factory, the parking lot is covered in the same dirty snow as at Mary’s house. Mary parks near an infinity of other American cars. Ford pickups and light blue Chevy Cavaliers and Dodges Dusters (the new and ugly kind) and paint-faded Chryslers. Mary shuts off the Fairmont, and as she slams shut the door, she prays the car will start again in ten hours. She hopes she’ll not have to rouse her husband.

After a slow walk across the parking lot, Mary enters Majestic and finds her time card. She wonders how many millions of times she has punched in and out and in during this life of hers. She tries to do the math—once in and once out per day. Five days a week. That is ten. Plus overtime weekends near the holidays. Forty-nine weeks a year. That is four hundred and ninety or more (*Let’s say five hundred*, she whispers to the time clock). Fifteen years so far. She stops doing the math. It’s less about the difficulty of the numbers and more about living with the answer. It’s easier just not knowing some things.

Mary grabs her time card and clocks into work, which is a world of industrial sewing machines (hundreds and hundreds of them) overlocking forever, or for whatever forever is to a human. Clocking into a world of needles screaming up and down, screaming—up and down. Clocking into a world where Mary replaces Bodkin needles until her fingers curl to a claw—her joints swollen and tired. Clocking into a world of thread bawling through fabric. Clocking into a world of managers yelling to reach quotas. (*Six hundred more Sox sweatshirts in the next fifteen minutes. The truck’s leaving.*) Clocking into a world of workers slouching over sewing machines (their backs seemingly humped forever—since birth itself). Clocking into a world of fabric cut and re-created into so many new (and un-magical) things—sports team tees and sweat pants and white socks (those cheapest white socks), three for a dollar.

As Mary gets to her workstation and prepares her machine, she wonders about the money needed to fix the Fairmont and minivan (*Nearly a grand right there*, she thinks—it’s enough to make her cry). As she drops bundles of fabric on the table beside her, she wonders about a husband who hasn’t worked since his DUI (*September*, she remembers). As she feeds the fabric under the needle, she wonders about Christmas—this year’s and next year’s and the one after—about the heat turned to 61 for the winter (though it aches so much colder in that house and feels as if the very heart of this house is a cold stone).

Mary stares at the dull glow of fluorescent lights that whitewash this factory. She cannot help but think, *Twenty-five more years of this. And then what? Then what?*

VI.

Mary clocks out of Majestic Garment Factory and steps into a world where the sun slouches into her low Kittatinny hills like an afternoon drunk. Even in this fading light, Mary squints her eyes—this much brightness after a day inside a windowless factory will make anyone squint.

Mary turns the key in the Fairmont, and it starts—sputtering. She looks at the roof and says a very quiet, *Thank you*. Shifting the car into first, Mary shivers (from the all-day cold of the car) as she thinks about today's wage, *God, what does \$81.50 feel like?* She wants to feel the money in her hand (cupped in this way, it would feel like such a small amount). Mary knows not to pray for a raise, not this year.

Pulling out of the parking lot, Mary shifts the Fairmont into second and thinks, *Eight days just to pay the mortgage*. She remembers the day she and her husband signed the papers, how grand they felt. That day (it seemed), they were on their way somewhere (this house and then the next and then one with an above-ground pool). Mary prays to be able to cover the mortgage until her husband finds work, finds a way to pull himself from the couch.

Mary shifts the Fairmont into third as the car climbs the hill separating Majestic from her row home. As she drives, Mary thinks, *Another ten days just to fix the minivan's tranny*. She has no hope for this Fairmont lasting much longer. When it dies, it dies—she has learned that lesson by now. When a thing needs to die, it dies.

Shifting into fourth, Mary crests the ridge and allows the steep hill to pull the Fairmont along—as if the Fairmont can drive itself home. As the car reaches 45, then 50, then 60 miles per hour, Mary wonders, *With a new transmission, how far can that minivan drive?* It is an honest question, a simple question. She thinks of praying for the Fairmont to last until the minivan's tranny is fixed and then for the minivan to last through next year.

Shifting into fifth—now on the flats and almost home (whatever home means anymore)—Mary mutters to herself (and to that husband asleep on the couch, to her hopeful children earning Cs in school), *I don't even know what to pray for*. She tightens her grip on the steering wheel while she mutters to herself (and the women working at Majestic, the men losing their jobs at Dixie, the pockmarked Kittatinnies, the abandoned quarries, the iced-over streams gurgling through dark and narrow gullies, and even the ravens caw-caw-cawing sadly in the leafless trees), *What should I pray for? For nothing? Nothing?*