

Charles Vermilyea Jr.
"You're Lucky To Be Alive"

As far as men's room sizes go, this pissoir is a pisser. You could play tennis in the damn thing. Guys facing opposite walls, pissing, washing their hands, whatever. It connects two hallways at the JFK library in Boston, my new home. I'm ready to make something of myself, and enrolled at Bunker Hill Community College. And, to make college a go, I've got this job at the library, kind of a guide and gofer. And, here I am at the JFK on a Saturday, making use of the men's room when I see a man and woman striding down the center aisle like they own the place. They are elegant people. Both over six feet tall, late 30s with good looks, and wearing expensive-looking clothes. She with a naughty smile that says "I'm special." He with a self-assured grin that says "I'm special." Problem is, special or not, she's walking through the men's room while men, lots of them, are about their business, so to speak.

Let me pause. I live in Southie, the Irish enclave in South Boston. And, I'm Irish. My mom and dad came over from western Ireland, where they say the next parish is Boston. As it turns out, my Southie connection is, to a degree, linked to the two striding down the pissoir aisle. That is, as I arrive home one afternoon, and pulling into the driveway, I see my landlord, Davey Mulcahey, talking with a man with bright red hair. He looks at me with a leaden gaze, which makes me uncomfortable, but I hear Davey, as he's known, say: "No worry there. He's a good kid. My tenant. And Irish, too. Parents from Galway."

But, it doesn't take me long, as an avid reader of the Globe, to find that the redhead is none other than Paddy McSwiggin, or Red, as he's called, if you don't mind losing a few teeth. Red is chieftain of the Hilltop Gang. Southie's most powerful. And, as far as Davey goes, I say each to his own.

At the JFK: "We're almost there!" says Missy, as she and her husband, Garth Fairbrook, near the far men's room exit. "Wait till the gang at the Dare Club hear that we've completed our dare."

Garth is general manager of a Mercedes/BMW/Mini group, the biggest high-end dealership in New England. Missy is Boston Globe food editor. In short, hot shits. But, they share a mindset with each other, and their social group, which is centered around their North Shore Country Club Dare Club. The pack of them engage in inanity, and have for some time, both as a group and individually. An example: when Missy and Garth were first married, they had sex on top of their washing machine, because the machine's motion enhanced the experience. Or, they enacted sex scenes from cheap novels. Years later, if in the right mood with their set, they would cutely refer to those days, with a twitter all around. Naughty boys and girls.

"Well," opines Missy, "looks like we did it. A cute trick, out the exit, and how about a drink"

"Yeah. Let's celebrate. We'll be eating out on this story for months."

But, not so fast!

In front of this playful couple is a man, blocking the way. He's about

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

5-8, on a good day. And about 160, on a good day. But, his most notable feature is blazing red hair.

Garth: "Pardon, me, sir, we're leaving."

Red: "No, you're not."

Garth, "Sir, I don't believe you understand. We're leaving the"

Red: "Go ahead and say it. The what?"

Missy: Well, uh, of course we realize where we are. We... ."

Red: "You don't realize nothing. And, keep your mouth shut till I get to you."

Garth: "Sir, you can't talk to my wife that way. You"

Red: "I can do anything I want. And, now, I want you to keep ya trap shut while I ask the lady what the fuck's she doin' in the men's room."

At this point the encounter has drawn the attention of the pissers and others.

Missy: "We are engaged in a contest of sorts"

Red: "You keep ya mouth shut till I ask a question."

Garth's facial expression shows anger, and Missy's a desire for salvation from this horrible man.

Red: "Now, missy, what's with you in the men's room? You a cock watcher? Or, what?"

Garth, with a step forward: "Why, you can't ... my wife ... that"

Red: "I told ya to keep the mouth shut. You won't get another warning."

Red continues: "Now, missy, what's with you here?"

Missy, with an expression of fear: "How did you know my name?"

Red, with a sigh: "Uh, I just guessed. Now, on with it."

Missy: "We're what our group calls actors, we act out dares. They gave us the dare of what we're trying to do here."

Red, with a broad smile: "Your group! ... You live on the North Shore, don't ya? One of those new-rich, upscale places? ... Don't answer. ... Now it all makes sense: assholes!"

Garth and Missy evince a twitch of shame, but Garth keeps his mouth shut.

Red, with sarcasm: "Well, I guess, considering you're from the North Shore and all, you can leave. "

Then, Red, with anger: "But, don't pull such fucking shit again!"

Garth and Missy leave, Missy with her eyes wide like saucers and hands fluttering, and Garth with a major case of the tight jaw. And, their exit is hastened by a resounding round of applause from the pissers, hand washers and others.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

It's Monday, and Missy arrives at the Globe and makes a beeline to her friend, Assistant Metro Editor Siobhan Shaleen. If Missy, Queen of Wine, Cheese and Crackers, has a Food Department story of wide interest, she goes to Siobhan, who is Boston Irish to the core: a Southie resident, born and raised, a graduate of the Northeastern University work/study J-major program and a devout Catholic. Missy, on the other hand, is a pure Irish Catholic product of Hell's Kitchen, the West Side of Manhattan. She escaped her fate when she won a scholarship to Bryn Mawr University in Pennsylvania, where from inferiority fears put on such rich-kid airs that she got no applause when she received a degree in Pottery. However, her verbal skills got her a job right out of the gate as a marketing writer for Garth's auto business, and led to her transformation from Maggie Flynn of Hell's Kitchen to Protestant Missy Fairbrook of the North Shore. A couple of clever restaurant reviews got her a gig at the Globe.

At the Globe Monday, "Oh, Siobhan, I'm so glad I caught you," stammers Missy, with her hands fluttering in front of her face. She seats herself next to Siobhan, who is at her terminal.

"You seem agitated, Missy. Must be something big brewing in wine and cheese," observes Siobhan. Missy, with an involuntary grin: "I'm afraid I'm desperate to speak to someone like you. Who knows the city. ... Please, do you have some time?"

"Sure. It's early. I'm working on the Metro budget, but it can wait. ... Maybe we should step out on the veranda."

On the veranda, Siobhan takes Missy's fluttering hands from in front of her face and pulls them down on her knees. "Your hands are like ice! ... You're white as a ghost, and perspiring. Are you gonna faint?"

"I think I can hold on. I've been like this since Saturday ... When it happened."

"Look, kid. I know you're as Irish as me, so, sister, lay it on me. What's up?"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"Oh! Oh! Oh! ... What the fuck's that?"

Missy, with a grin: "It's so embarrassing. ... Well, OK. ... Garth and I were doing the dare thing. You know, like we do with our North Shore friends."

"No, I don't know, but can imagine. ... Go ahead."

"Well, our dare was that Garth and I were to get away with me and him walking down the middle of that giant men's room at the JFK library."

"Ya got nothin' betta ta do? ... Oh, I'm sorry ta be judgmental. Go ahead."

"You're right. It's stupid, but we did it ... almost. When we got almost to the end, Garth said we were in the Red Zone, this man stopped us."

"Security guard?"

"No, just a civilian, like us. But not like us. Not like anybody."

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

"What'd he do?"

"He put up his hand, like a traffic cop, and said, 'Stop!' Then he said to me, 'Where the fuck you think you're going.' Garth tried to step in. He said, 'Sir, you have no right to talk to me wife in that manner.' He said to Garth: 'Keep your fucking mouth shut. You got nothing to say, so stay out!' " Poor Garth, he tried to man up, he's 6 foot 5, and played lacrosse at Stanford, but I could tell he was as terrified as I was of this little guy. It was like looking at Dracula."

"Then, he let you go?"

"Sort of. He asked why I was walking through the men's room. I was so embarrassed, but told him about the dare. He, then, called us assholes, and made me promise I'd never do it again. Like I was a child, which I guess my behavior showed I was. Then, all the men in the men's room applauded. We were so humiliated."

"They applauded because they were offended by your action, but didn't have the courage to do something about it. Like this guy."

"Oh."

"Missy, can you describe this person? Physically?"

"Oh, sure. About 5-8, maybe 160, freckles, and the most flaming red hair, cut short."

"Jayus, Mary an' Joseph! You were face-to-face with Red McSwiggin. – but, don't ever call him Red, if you want to stay healthy. He's a stone killer, the baddest Southie has to offer, and that's a lot. It's good Garth was scared, like you. You're lucky to be alive!"

It's Friday at Red's HQ, an auto body shop in Southie. Red's at the grill, showing his generosity to his minions by whipping up a weekly steak lunch, Porter House, of course.

Minion Freddie is all in an uproar as he rushes to Red with a copy of the Globe: "Boss! Boss! Ya gotta see dis. The Globe has a steak contest. Your Red's Special Sauce will make ya the winna!"

Red takes the paper, and: "Ohooooo! Ya right, Freddie. ... I'm already the winna."

The ad shows Missy, wearing a chef's hat, and a huge, dark Italian, Mingo Indelicato, also wearing a chef's hat, both with grins as wide as the flight deck of the Enterprise. Large red letters say, "GOT STEAK?" And, "The Globe Food Section, in conjunction with the famous North End eatery, Mingo's Beef Emporium, is sponsoring a contest to find the best steak recipe in the city. Entries will be judged by Globe Food Editor Missy Fairbrook and Chef Mingo Indelicato. Winner will be invited to introduce his or her steak recipe to the public and will receive a year's supply of steak!"

There was an entry coupon, and Missy and Mingo's signatures were shown below their images.

The next day, Missy is at her Globe computer station when she receives a call.

"Hello," says she.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

"I'm the winna."

"What? I'm sorry?"

"I'm the winna."

"Sir, the winner of what?"

"The steak contest, of course."

"Sir, to win, you must first submit a steak contest entry."

"Not me. Just put me down as the winna: Padraig Seamus McSwiggin. Sometimes known as Paddy and sometimes as Red, if you don't care about ya health. Now, you understand? The JFK library? I'm the winna."

Missy turns pale, and her hands begin to flutter in front of her face.

Missy, in a whisper: "Please, Mister McSwiggin, you can't do this. I can't just give first place to you."

"Yes you can, and you will, if I say so. How about I come to the Globe and talk this over with you?"

"No! No! No! Not that!"

"OK, I got a better idea."

"What might that be?"

"You be my guest at a steak lunch at my business, Paddy's Auto Body in Southie. I want to show ya my steak recipe could be the winna, fair and square. And, also, I don't like the idea of being judged by some fat wop from the North End."

"I don't know if I can"

"You can, and will. Be ready for pickup tomorrow at noon in front of the Globe."

Red's steak recipe was filched from the Peter Lugar steak house in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, NY. Red looked it up after he heard of TV host Johnny Carson's praise for Lugar's. The recipe included garlic, Kosher salt, rosemary and butter. As far as amounts went, Red would wing it.

Missy shows up at Red's body shop in a silver Lincoln Town Car, with a driver decked out in a grey monkey suit. She's ushered to a seat at an outdoor table like she's Mrs. Gotrocks. It's already inhabited by a couple, Rico D'Errico and his wife, Tooty. Although a member of the despised Italian race, Rico is Red's primary strong arm.

"I hope this meets with ya approval," says Red. "Put it here." He pulls out a chair for Missy.

"Missy Fairbrook, these are my friends, who will dine with us," Rico and Tooty D'Errico."

They do hello all around, but Missy is already looking apprehensive.

"Now," says Red, "check out the Saltus. ... Rico, Tooty, that means the menu."

Rico: "We're not Mongolians."

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

Red: "Sorry. ... Just thought"

"Anyways," continues Red, "here it comes: Red's Own Special Steak, Porter House, of course, with Red's own marinade, invented by Red; baked potato with sour cream, yogurt and chives; green bean casserole with almonds (got that out of a magazine) and for desert, Friendly's ice cream cake and coffee. But wait, the wine! Egri Bikaver, that means Bull's Blood, for the uninitiated. What ya think, Missy?"

Missy: "Sounds wonderful," with a tremor.

Rico: "One point, if you don't mind."

"Go right ahead."

"What's with Red? I thought you hated that name."

"Rico, in certain situations, and this is one a them, a name with greater cachet is required."

"OK, go with that cachet! ... Just askin'."

One of Red's thugs, posing as a waiter, brings the Porterhouse to the table, followed by the other items.

"Please, girls, you first," says Red, with a broad smile.

Missy and Tooty dig in, and as Tooty leans forward she exposes her cleavage, which is as deep as the Grand Canyon. Missy can't take her eyes off of them.

Red: "Some set, huh? ... Ya still swing both ways, Tooty?"

Rico: "Sure she does. ... You interested, Sweetie," with an elbow to Missy's side.

"No, no. Please, no." with a tremor.

Red: "OK. Forget it. Just having a little fun. Come on. Try the steak."

Missy, whose hands are beginning to flutter, takes a bit of the Porterhouse: "Oh, my! Quite good!" With a faint smile.

She nibbles on more, but is looking pale and fails to continue: "I think I've had enough, thank you."

Rico: "You gonna leave dat?"

Missy: "You may have it, and the potato and vegetable, too."

Rico scoops all onto his plate.

Tooty: "I don't know. ... He eats too much meat, and that starts him fahtin'."

Missy's hand fluttering picks up steam.

"Missy," Red says, "you should calm down. Enjoy life. You and me? We'd make a great team! Ever think a dumping the husband? With me, it's Porterhouse every day."

Tooty: "He got somethin' there. You should listen."

Missy, clasping her hands to keep them from fluttering away, says, "I'm

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

very happily married, and would never consider another!"

"I don't know. You'd do OK with me. I'd fit right in with those Brahmins you hang with. I could do the dare game."

"Yeah!" says Rico. "Dare ya ta find out where Paddy got the bodies buried. ... Ha, ha ,ha."

Red: "Rico!"

Tooty: "Time ta go!"

Tooty, to Rico: "I'll drive, and you get in the back seat. ... And, keep the windows open!"

To Red and Missy: "The Fahtin' has commenced."

Missy: "And, me, too! I really have to go! Now!"

She starts to rise, but Red signals her to sit.

Red: "Listen to this before ya go. I just taught ya a lesson. You think you're special, walking through a men's room with ya big shot husband. You think ya got what all the Big Brains on TV call 'entitlement.' But that one little mistake ya made at the JFK let me into ya life. Think about it. ... Now, ya can go!"

Missy, pale as a sheet, hurries to the Lincoln and gets in a back seat. She rolls down a window and screams: "You're too short for me!." Then, to the driver: "Go! Go! Go!"

I pick up the Globe during a break at the JFK, and recognize two people with embarrassed, shit-eating grins peeking out from their wet hair, which covers most of their faces. Nonetheless, I recognize them. They're the two from the men's room, who had the run-in with Red. The caption explains that the couple, Garth and Missy Fairbrook, had been partaking of a dare, which required them to climb a fence, enter a swimming pool and come back with proof of their accomplishment. In this case, they had been swimming after a stray life ring with "Framingham Rec" imprinted on it. But the proof was an arrest for trespassing on a closed municipal pool.

Siobhan, with a copy of the Globe in her hands: "These people just nevah learn!"

Red, with a copy of the Globe in his hands: "She really would do better with me!"

Out loud, I say to myself: "These beautiful people? ... Flakes!"