

MAUREEN BIRNBAUM IN THE MUD

E. J. Spiegelman
(As told to George Alec Effinger)

So picture this:

I'm like sitting on the edge of the upstairs bathtub, which in Mums and Daddy's house is half-sunken so my knees are jammed up under my chin, and I'm watching my dear, dear friend Maureen Birnbaum the Interplanetary Adventuress, apply eye shadow. Maureen is, you know, very finicky about makeup when she uses it, which isn't often these days because she's most definitely a barbarian swordsperson who only rarely bothers with normal stuff.

Her style of dress begins and ends with her solid gold-and-jewel brassiere and G-string and her grooming habits have likewise been put on hiatus in favor of perpetual vigilance. Muffy—that was her old nickname back in the Greenberg School days, but you should know how much she hates it now—spends her waking hours hacking and hewing villains and monsters. And is, she tells me, a very good hacker and hewer indeed, and I should doubt her? Well, okay, entre nous sometimes I have just these little teen suspicions that Muffy's narrations are how-shall-I-say preposterous.

Be that as it may. Muffy applied the eye makeup in layers of several different but carefully chosen shades. In the olden days, sometimes she'd end up looking like a surprised raccoon with white paint north of her nose. She's gotten more skillful since then—though like I still wouldn't want to compare the results to Monet's waterlilies effect between her brows and eyelids. It seemed to me that she was aiming at a kind of Monet-at-Giverny waterlilies effect between her brows and eyelids.

The color she was, well, slathering is a good verb, was called Azul Jacinto. Muffy was applying it vigorously but like inexpertly blending this weird purple eye shadow with the previous tinctorial stratum, which if I remember correctly was Caramel Smoke. They should've put a "Kids: Don't Try This At Home" warning on the containers.

She goes, "Finally, finally, I've found a way to get back to Mars and my own true beloved Prince Van. And like I want to look just absolutely devastating. So be cruel, Bitsy. Tell me what you really think. Honestly, now."

"You look terrific, sweetie," I go. Let her find out the hard way. That's what she gets for calling me Bitsy. I've told her a million times that if she can't stand being called Muffy, I can't stand being called Bitsy. I'm not seventeen anymore. I'm a grown-up divorced mother with responsibilities, and I want to be treated with respect every bit as much as Muffy-Maureen-does.

She smiled at herself in the mirror. "Great," she goes. "I'll only be a little longer." She'd said that an hour ago.

"Should I go out and tell the cab driver? Take him a Coke or some coffee or something?"

Maureen just shrugged. "I'll give him a big tip. He'd rather have that than coffee anyway sure. Cab drivers wait for me all the time."

"Whatever."

"So," she goes, making her mouth into a big open

O and stretching her right eyebrow upward with her pinkie, "where was I?"

Damn it I was, you know, praying that she'd forget about telling me the rest of her most recent thrilling exploit. "You whooshed out of New Orleans and wound up in this bitty little medieval village."

"Uh huh," she goes, hastily daubing Azul Jacinto like a muralist rushing to meet the NEA grant deadline. "Well, be a darling and open that other box of Frango chocolates, the raspberry ones, and I'll just finish up here."

Comment dites-vous en français "Yeah. Right." What follows, I swear, I am not making should only be so clever.

I shouldn't even be like talking to you anymore, Bitsy, the way you left me standing there on the sidewalk in New Orleans. Do you mind if I tell you that I thought you were just too R-U-D-E for words? Still, all that's forgiven, because we've been best friends forever and can see what a wretched life you've carved out for yourself, but didn't I warn you about Jos? And didn't I point out-

All right. Never mind. I'm sorry I brought it up. So there I was, like simply abandoned in this strange city, thank you very much. They call New Orleans "The City That Care Forgot," but they've forgotten other things, too. Like the past participle. All over town, I kept running into "ice tea' and boil shrimp" and "smoke sausage." I really wanted to sample that smoke sausage just to see if it was like my Nanny's shadow soup. She said when they were too poor to buy chicken, she'd, you know, borrow someone else's and hold it over her pot of boiling water. That's how you make shadow soup. Cossacks were involved in that story somehow, but I can't exactly remember how.

I've lost my train of thought, I must be getting old. Oh, for sure, the village. You know they can whoosh through time and space with ease, but that I don't always end up exactly where I planned. Believe me, sweetie, I hadn't planned to visit this-well, I hate to call it a town, exactly, because it was made up of just five horrible tiny shops and no houses at all. Don't you think that's a little odd?

Sure, the merchants must've lived in the back of their shops, except I didn't see any back. Just these one-room huts made out of sticks. They could've learned some important and useful things about architecture from a Neolithic tribe in New Guinea or somewhere.

So here's Maureen Birnbaum, Protector of the Weak, ankling into this dinky place. It looks like a strip mall of outlet stores during the reign of King Albert.

Albert. King Albert. The one who burned the cakes. You remember. No, that wasn't Charlemagne. It was King Albert the Great. Or somebody. Hey, Bitsy, it's not even important, all right? Jeez!

So guess what the name of this village was? No, not Brooklyn. Ha ha, too amusing for words, Bits. No, they called the place Mudville. As in "There is no joy in." I thought, "Like wow, I've traipsed into another literary allusion." I was all set for Casey at the Bat and baseball. Girlfriend, was I ever wrong.

Imagine, if you will, Our Hero entering the first of the five shops of sticks. A tinkling bell announced my arrival-further oddness, on account of there was no actual door for the bell to tinkle on. I turned around and saw what was probably the shopkeeper's teenage son, a gawky kid with a face so broken out it looked like a Hayden Planetarium sky show in Technicolor. He was crouched beside the entrance with a little bell and a little hammer. Hey, what the hell, was he learning the trade and you got to start someplace, I guess.

The guy behind the counter goes, "Welcome to Scrupulously Honest and Fair Fred's Armory Emporium. May I help you?"

"Are you Scrupulously Honest and Fair Fred?"

"No, he's sick today. I'm his brother, Aethelraed, but never fear, dear lady, I am also scrupulously honest and fair. Pretty much."

"Uh huh," I go, "and don't call me 'dear lady.'"

"May I show you our wares? We just got in a very nice tarnhelm, nearly mint condition. The previous owner came to a sorry end guarding a hoard."

"Bummer," I go. "So like it didn't do that owner a hell of a lot of good. Not a terrific recommendation for the tarnhelm. Still, let me take a look. How much are you asking for it?"

The merchant smiled broadly. "Just three thousand pieces of gold. A wonderful deal. Shall I wrap it for you or will you wear it?"

Well, Bitsy, I had a twenty-dollar bill stuffed in my right bra cup and a one-dollar bill

stuffed in the left. Of course, for emergencies I had a charge card tucked in my G-string. I thought three thousand pieces of gold sounded rand of steep for a tarnhelm-it's magic, Bitsy turns you into whatever shape you want. I see 'em all the time-and I didn't know if this goni could relate to Daddy's AmEx plastic. Sure, no matter where I go in the Known Universe, they speak English-isn't that neat?-but sometimes their medium of exchange is edible roots and not dollars.

So like anyway, just as I was about to make a totally withering reply, what do I hear but-wait for it-my mother's voice behind me-not Pammy, Daddy's babe/wife, but like my actual mother, who I haven't heard from in months. Okay, so I haven't been around much myself, but I'd just assumed Mom had disappeared under a mountain of mah-jongg tiles in Miami Beach someplace. And she goes, "So is that worthless piece-of-trash tarnhelm still under warranty? Miss Buy-The-First-Thing-You-See?"

I turned around and just stood there, blinking like an idiot. I didn't know what to say to her, so I go, "Mom? What are you doing here?"

She shrugged. "Shopping. That's a crime now?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again, you know, like dumbfounded. Finally I go, "You're in the market for chainmail today?"

She gave me one of her little tsk noises. "What, I can't go into a store and browse around a little? Where does it say I can't just look at prices?"

She picked up a Cloak of Invisibility that she couldn't have paid for if she had all the money Daddy made when he sold his silver to the Hunt brothers. "You don't find quality like this elsewhere on Seventh Avenue," she goes, and she tossed the cloak aside like it was some horrible thing I'd given her for her birthday.

That's when I guessed it wasn't really Mom. My real Mom would've tossed the cloak aside all right, but then she'd have given it a disdainful look and told the shopkeeper, "You'll accept ten dollars, I might take it off your hands." This near-Mom hadn't even tried to bargain.

"Hey," I go, "who are you really?"

She took a breath and heaved a sigh. It was very authentic. "My name, Maureen, is Glorian. I am called Glorian of the Knowledge by some, yet I have other names, many other names. I am a supernatural personage of ancient power and wisdom, here to guide you on your appointed quest."

"I hate these goddamn quests," I go. And I do, too. Like why can't I accidentally whoosh myself to a nice beach with clean white sand and warm water and a few eager Brad Pitt types and a pitcher of strawberry daiquiris and, you know, no one expecting me to defend or rescue

anybody at all for a couple of weeks. That doesn't seem to be in the cards for good old Maureen.

"No one enjoys quests," Glorian goes. "It wouldn't be much of a trial if it was all fun and laughter."

I turn on my Number Three Frown-you know: I Really Don't Have Time For This. And I like, "No way I can just whoosh on out of here and bag this whole quest thing, huh?"

Glorian-Mom smiled. "I'm sorry."

So I shrugged A warrior-woman's work is never done. "Then let's rally," I go.

"Cool." like my Mom would never say "Cool." Like anybody called "Glorian of the Knowledge" would ever say "Cool," either. Yet, Bitsy, it happened: I was there.

Now here's a secret Maureen Birnbaum makeup tip for you. After you put on the darker shade of eye shadow, you want to dab on just an eensy amount of the under-color right in the middle of the eyelid-where did that Caramel Smoke go?-okay, here. Watch. Now, if Prince Van was the disco type, I'd put some gold glitter there instead. But he's not, and I'm not, and you probably wouldn't even have-

You do? Well, get rid of it.

So then this Glorian goes, "There are a number of ground rules, of course, but I'll explain them as we go along. The first thing you must know is that you'll need certain supplies: arms, weapons, magical scrolls and texts, potions and wands, as well as sufficient food and water. By its nature, the quest places certain limitations on you. For instance, you may carry a total of only twenty objects."

"I don't see why-"

Glorian raised a hand "Twenty objects, regardless of their combined weight. Please believe me. The Powers That Be will not permit you to carry more. If you have twenty objects, and find something more that you wish to take, you must drop one of the other items."

"What about you?" I go. "Your arms, are broken, or are you too, you know, special to give me a hand? Or don't you mythical types schlep like normal people?"

Glorian looked at me for a moment. "I will carry your treasures for you, but not your weapons and your other, shall we say, impedimenta."

The word treasures I liked. "Great. I can deal with that, then. One thing I would like, however, is could you please stop looking like my Mom? And like right now! It's driving me crazy."

There was this little wibbly blur in the air where Glorian was standing, and then my Mo sort of turned into-this is going to sound omigod weird-Brad Pitt. Like that Glorian character had read my mind about the white sand beach and the daiquiris and everything. And now I'm going to have to spend this entire exploit with a semi-real know-it-all who looked just like Brad Pitt.

I truly felt that I was up to the challenge.

"The second important rule is that you begin the quest with five hundred pieces of gold. That's all you have. You must decide how to spend it here in the town. You may purchase anything you like, of course, but what you choose may seriously affect your chances of survival."

"Ha," I go. "I've survived this long, haven't I? I think that shows that I can manage for myself, thank you very much."

"Maureen, everyone alive today has survived this long. None of them seriously believes he'll live forever."

Well, I wasn't about to tell him that I suspected that I was immortal. Bitsy, it's true. I mean it. I think I am immortal. All right, stop laughing. You just don't know what I know.

Blusher. What do you have in the way of blushers? These aren't my tones, after all, but you're seeing the real Maureen pioneering spirit at work here. I guess I can fake it with a la of Vent du Désert and some Pêche aux Chandelles smushed around on top. That'll look tuff on my nipples, too, huh? Oh, grow up, Bitsy. Hey, you don't have one of those big Ping-Pong ball-shaped sable brushes? Never mind, I'll use my thumb. Resourceful, sweetie, fighting women are always resourceful.

Anyway, I decided to peek around in all five of the shops before I shelled out a single gold piece. I started making up a shopping list. It was pretty tough, though. I saw a million things I wanted-it was like, oh, say your mother gives you a thousand-dollar gift certificate to Tiffanys and you go in there all excited and everything, and you find out that all you can afford are two silver cigarette cases or half a pair of the earrings you really want. See what I mean? Perspicuously bogus, huh?

Fortunately, it turned out that the major expense for your average hero-trainee is the weapon. Most begin with a puny dagger and hope to trip over something better during the quest itself. I, of course, came pre-armed with my most fab broadsword, Old Betsy, so that meant I could spend more on other things.

I took Glorian's advice and bought food and water and a lamp. Evidently it was dark where we were going. The lamp was this cheesy brass Aladdin-looking thing. It burned all right, and

it gave off a bright enough light, but when I shook it, nothing sloshed inside. I checked it out and you know I couldn't even find a place where you'd put oil into the damn thing. "Magic," Glorian goes. I figured what the hell.

Finally, I've got about four hundred pieces of gold left. I was going to invest it all in a new suit of steel plate armor, but Scrupulously Honest and Fair Aethelraed wanted two thousand for it, and I couldn't haggle him down any lower than seventeen five. I finally walked out of his crummy shop wearing a hard leather-outfit studded with metal points-I mean, wow, I would have been a big hit back in the French Quarter bars, but oh no! like I wasn't there anymore. And I didn't have a whole lot of confidence in the leather gear, not when it came to protecting me from scrabbling claws and gnashing teeth.

So this is how I began my adventure: with the swell groovy kinky bitchin' North Beach Leather ensemble-out nothing much in the way of special hand, foot, or head protection-and a small shield, also leather, but brown. Brown! Who wears brown leather?

Oh. Well. On you it looks good, honey.

I had the stupid genieless lamp and Old Betsy and five portions of food-Glorian chose the best for me, on the basis of nutritional value, wholesome ingredients, and his own idea of a cost/benefit ratio. I asked him, "What kind of food is in those packages?" He goes, "It's food. Just food. The kind you get at a wayside inn. You know, you sit down at a big table and they bring you food. I also had a wooden canteen filled with drink-

"Just drink" he goes-and a modest selection of magical items.

I hadn't wanted to spend money on magic. I figured me 'n' Old Betsy ought to be a match for any kind of monster we were likely to meet. Glorian disagreed. I could always count on him to disagree. What a feeb.

We book it on out of town-the place was five huts big, so out of town was maybe a hundred yards down the road-and Glorian goes, "Close your eyes. Please don't ask, just do it."

I closed my eyes like a good girl.

"Fine," he goes. "Now you can open them."

Well, I look and suddenly there's a cave beside the road. There hadn't been a cave there before. There hadn't even been rocks for a cave to be in. Now there was a bunch of rocks and this like danksome cave. "And this is?"

Brad Pitt looked all blond and solemn. "Caverns measureless to man," he goes.

"Down to a sunless sea," I go. Wow, one of those days I was awake in Mr. Salomon's c

finally paid off in The Real World. Anyway, Glorian's eyebrows raised a little. Score one for the Muffster-and don't you ever call me that!

"Please, Maureen," Glorian goes, "after you." So, with Old Betsy in one hand and the lantern in the other, I ducked into the cave and started down a long, winding staircase hewed from living rock and like all covered with this funky wet green gunk.

"What is this place?" I go.

"It's a MUD, Maureen."

"Hey, it's got water dripping down the walls and the place reeks, but at least there's no mud. I don't see any mud."

"No, not mud. MUD. An acronym meaning Multi-User Dungeon. It's a term used by people involved in online computer role-playing games."

Bitsy, I was steamed. "Games? Is this a game? I don't have time, for games, Glorian! There are poor, suffering women and children out there who need my help!"

Glorian-Brad frowned. "You'll soon find out that this is no game. This is very serious. Deadly serious."

"Good," I go. "I don't want to waste valuable killing time on pretend enemies. I haven't even seen any monsters yet."

"Soon."

"No treasures, either, pal." Hardly had I gotten those words out of my mouth, when I followed a sharp turn in the passageway and entered a big, high-vaulted subterranean chamber. Overhead there were stalactites in every goddamn color you could think of-stalactites, Bitsy. No, you're wrong. I made up a mnemonic like fully years ago. Stalactite comes alphabetically before stalagmite in the dictionary, and you read from the top to the bottom. Stalactites hang down. Trust me.

Well, just forget it, then, honey. The important thing is the chamber wasn't entirely empty. There was this gooey thing in one corner, radiating a kind of sick pink glow. In a horrible way it reminded me of those pink marshmallow Peeps you see around Easter time. You know, the ones you let get stale and then you microwave 'em. That's what we always did. I'm sorry,

Bitsy, I guess you just missed out on whole lots when you were a kid.

I looked more closely at the monster. "Yuck," I go. "What is that thing?"

"It's a Pink Goopy Thing," Glorian goes. I know, Bitsy. He was just terribly helpful like through the whole miserable adventure. I asked him what I should do, and he goes, "You can kill it."

Aw, don't give me that, Bitsy. It looked like it really needed killing. Besides, it would probably have shot me full of monster death rays in another few seconds. This was like not that zoo lady ever brought out to show Johnny Carson.

Johnny Carson. You know, the theoretically funny guy who comes on right before David Letterman. Huh? You're kidding. I can't keep up with all that stuff. It's a good thing that like really don't care.

Anyway, I started walking forward, wielding Old Betsy, but then I decided to try out on my magical weapons. I figured it would be good to get familiar with them before I faced, you know, the evil, terrible Nightmare Critter that guarded the Treasure Beyond Counting. That was my ultimate goal, Glorian had told me. If I lived that long.

I had several scrolls and one magic wand. I felt kind of, oh, stupid waving the wand I heard these little mouse-voices in my mind singing "Bibbity-Bob-bity-Boo," but I did it anyway. I was a Wand of Basic Blast, the poosliest magic weapon in the shop, but also the only one I could afford.

The wand made pretty Tinkerbell dust in the air, and then there was a distinct zapping sound and I smelled something awful like the time Daddy's fan belt broke on I-95 but he didn't realize it for a few miles. Where the Pink Goopy Thing had been, there was now nothing much except a few pretty red stones.

"Well done, Maureen!" Glorian goes. "You've slain the Pink Goopy Thing. You've gained five Experience Points, and you find two hundred and fifty gold pieces worth of rubies."

"Tremendous," I go. "Let's hurry back up to the town and buy some more of this delicious drink, I'm so sure."

"Ha ha. Your Wand of Basic Blast has nine charges left."

"Say What?" I go. "Nine charges? You mean these things have to be reloaded? What kind of magic is that?"

"I forgot to tell you."

"And what's an Experience Point when it's at home?"

"You wouldn't understand."

I stopped in my tracks. I almost Basic Blasted his supernatural ass right into my next adventure. "Glorian," I go, in my Dangerous Voice, "did I hear you correctly?"

"Um," he goes, doing a speedy reconsider. "When you collect enough Experience Points you're promoted to the next level and you're rewarded with a greater Hit Point quotient and larger Hex reserve. Hex Points are what you use to cast a spell without a wand."

"I don't know any spells, Glorian."

"You will," he goes. "Let's just move along now. There's probably another supernatural guide with another hero up on the surface, waiting for us to clear out of here."

I shook my head. "You make this sound like Disneyworld."

He nodded. "A lot of the same people worked on it."

"Uh huh. Well, I just hope I won't have to chop an Abraham Lincoln animatronic to pieces down here. That would be just so ill."

We followed the underground path a little further, into the second vaulted chamber-Glorian preferred to call them "rooms." It was a lot like the first one, complete with a monster waiting for me. Jeez, Bitsy, if they really wanted to kill me, you'd think they'd get together and jump on me all at once, instead of spreading themselves so thin. Hey, it was okay by me if they were dumb to live.

This one was a Giant Flaming Grasshopper. Try to imagine it for yourself, because I'm having trouble with these false eyelashes of yours. Where do you buy your accoutrements, honey? Lamston's? I mean, hell. I've found better makeup on worlds that hadn't made it into the Industrial Revolution yet. No offense. Hand me those little bitty scissors, okay? I have to trim the ends of these lashes or they poke me in the corner of my eye and drive me crazy! Thank you, Bits.

The Grasshopper? Easy, I took Old Betsy to it. Three whacks, that's all. Without sweat. When I slew the sucker, it disappeared, and there was a curled-up parchment scroll on the ground. I picked it up. "What's this?" I go.

Glorian took a peek. "You have a Scroll of Locate Bathroom. Save that one-you'll want it later."

"Gotcha."

"And you have seven more Experience Points."

"That's just so exciting, Glorian. Now c'mon."

In the next dozen rooms, I killed a dozen more monsters: an Inedible Lump, a Hound From Hell, a Blue Blob, a Magenta Blob, three or four more giant insects, a couple of Spooks-on-Quilted and one Plaid-and finally the most unspeakable-a Zombie Mallwalker. In return, I scored about fifteen pounds of precious and semi-precious stones, one of the worthless daggers, and a Wand of Shrieking. I also found three other magical items: a Scroll of Gain Weight, a Scroll of Blindness, and a Tonic of Cure Poison.

I dropped the Scrolls of Gain Weight-don't say a word, Bitsy-and Blindness. Glorian said there were a lot of booby prizes around in these caverns, mixed in with the valuable stuff. I also said that sometimes what looked at first like a booby prize could turn out to be worth keeping. I thought about what he said for a few seconds, and then I dropped the dagger and Wand of Shrieking also. It turned out later that he'd been right-aw hell, he was always right that the Wand of Shrieking would've been very useful against two or three monsters I came across further along.

I also accumulated a hundred Experience Points, and got my first promotion. I became Maureen Birnbaum, Stalwart 1st Grade. You know, oddly enough, I didn't feel the least bit different.

From then on, it was one room after another, one monster after another. There were more Goopy Things, Lumps, Blobs, and Spooks, all in rainbow colors, and giant insects of all kinds and then I started running into rodents, which didn't please me-Giant Glowing Rats, Raven Mice, and Lust-Crazed Hamsters. That's what Glorian called 'em, anyway.

In one room I found a Baby Green Gremlin, and I sort of hated to, you know, slaughter the poor thing except it leaped right for my goddamn throat. And in the next room was a Mommy Green Gremlin, followed by the Daddy Green Gremlin. That Daddy gave me a real battle. I used Old Betsy like she'd never been used before, and every bit of magic stuff I had with me. Finally, though, the Daddy Green Gremlin disappeared in a noxious cloud of avocado-colored smoke, leaving behind about a thousand pieces of gold, some scrolls, two wands, and, best of all, a complete suit of really neat chainmail.

Really neat chainmail in, God help me, Size 6.

What kind of Size 6 heroes were they expecting around there? Maybe some eleven-year-old girl gymnasts had passed through the week before or something. "Glorian," I go, "how about a Wand of Expand Armor? A Scroll of A Summer, Shapelier You? I can't even fit my hand in this sleeve."

"Very sorry, Maureen," he goes. "I have no control over what appears after you extinguish a monster. You have to take the trash with the treasures."

I've always felt that the world could get along very well without people smaller than a S

10. Oh, yeah? Name one. Bitsy, Meg Ryan is an actor. They're not even real.

After I killed a Red Wiggler-giving me a Half-Strength Healing Potion and two hundred pieces, of gold-it looked like the corridor had come to a dead end.

Glorian goes, "Just a moment." He went to a blank wall, bent over-Brad Pitt's buns in tight cutoff jeans-and pressed something. I don't know exactly what he did but the wall sort of swiveled, revealing another down staircase cut into the speckled gray granite. Down we went to the next level.

"What's down here?" I go.

"It gets more difficult the further we descend, but the rewards are comparably greater as well."

In the first room, there was not one but two monsters waiting for me. I wondered what they did between heroes. You couldn't even get up a good game of "I Spy." There was really nothing to look at.

The first monster was a Furry Fungoid, according to Glorian, and the other was a plain old Werewolf. They came at me together, and I worked up a pretty good sweat before I managed to kill them. When I did, more gold and jewels appeared, along with a Wand of Fireballs and a Magic Parchment.

Just as I thought that Glorian would need a shopping bag to carry all the treasure, damn it, he didn't pull a Bloomingdale's shopping bag out of the air somehow. Don't ask me. It was, I think, one of his supernatural talents. It was very practical-better than, say, spinning oats into molybdenum.

Now, though, I had to make some decisions. I had gathered twenty-two items, and I'd have to drop a couple. I asked Glorian's advice. He goes, "The Wand of Fireballs is a much more potent weapon than Basic Blast."

"Okay." I dropped the Wand of Basic Blast.

"You'll want to keep the Magic Parchment. When you learn a new spell, you have to write it on the Parchment before you can use it."

After a lot of thought, I dropped a Ring of Increased Stamina. I hated to lose it, but I had enough confidence in my natural abilities. We went on.

Before we entered the next room, Glorian touched my arm. "If you successfully defeat the next monster, you'll be promoted to Stalwart 2nd Grade. Then you may choose one magic spell to learn."

"I'll be successful," I go. "Do you have some doubt?"

He gave me that full-lipped Brad Pitt smile. I just sort of you know, dissolved inside. And he goes, "It would be a good idea to save now and then. Especially before this important battle."

That one soared right over my head. "What do you mean, 'save'?"

"It's a long and tedious process, Maureen, but when you're killed, I'll be able to resurrect you at precisely the moment when the save was done."

I didn't buy into this getting-killed thing. Glorian mentioned it with absolute certainty, and I didn't appreciate his lack of confidence. I'm like, "You can resurrect me? How do our community's spiritual leaders feel about that?"

He sort of let that one pass. "Do you wish to save now?"

"Sure," I go. "I'm easy to get along with."

The procedure was boring, just as he'd warned. I thought there would be some colorful magic involved, maybe a lot of chanting and incantation and some nice incense and stuff. Afraid not. Mostly Glorian just sat down on the cold granite floor and typed.

He typed, Bitsy. I don't know on what. Suddenly he had this keyboard that like wasn't connected to anything, and he typed. For ten or fifteen minutes. When he was done, he stood up. The keyboard seemed to have gone away again. "All right," he goes. "Now you can enter fearlessly into that room."

I go, "Hey! Like I didn't need you to transcribe your thoughts for a quarter of an hour to get me fearlessly into the next room. I was fearless before I met you, and I'll be fearless long after you've gone back to... wherever."

"As you say."

The next room was like most of the others except for one detail: I didn't see a single monster. "Am I supposed to wait around here or what?" I go. "Jeez, some monster missed its cue, and I have to hold up my whole quest until it feels like showing up?"

Glorian spoke to me in Brad Pitt's soft, low voice. Have you ever noticed how blue his eyes are? Anyway, he goes, "Have patience, Maureen. No time is passing in the real world while we're down here. When you return-if you return-it will not be a moment later than when you first arrived in the village of Mudville."

"That's okay, but I still want to get on with it. I have more imp-" Something whacked me good one on the back of my head. I almost fell on my face. Instead, I spun around and saw--nothing. There was nothing there. That didn't seem to matter, because it hit me so hard just below my breastbone that I doubled over and almost barfed.

"It's an Invisible Gooley Thing," Glorian informed me.

I wanted to make a crushingly sarcastic reply, but it as all I could do to force air into my lungs. When I could breathe again, I started poking around with Old Betsy, trying to find the goddamn monster. Blammo! It hit me again. I was getting furious.

And like Glorian is yelling, "Put your back against a wall!"

Good thought. That would keep the Invisible Gooley Thing from sneaking up behind me. I went to one of the room's corners. When the monster came after me again, I'd be able to find it and kick its see-through ass into Monster Heaven.

It didn't take long. I collected a pretty good jab to the stomach, and then I lashed out with Old Betsy. I swung with all my strength at what looked to me like thin air.

I hit something. There was a tiny, shrill scream, and I saw a puddle of Gooley Thing blood form on the floor, and from out of nowhere a double handful of diamonds and a scroll appeared.

Glorian goes, "Very well done, Maureen! You killed it!"

I just, you know, played humble. I go, "You don't have to see 'em to whack 'em." Glorian scooped up the diamonds and added them to my treasure. I took the scroll and opened it. The writing was very decorative in a Metropolitan Museum of Art kind of way. Across the top was lettered A Scroll of Glass Breaking. I sure didn't want to trade off one of my twenty items to carry that worthless piece of magic, so I just dropped it and went on toward the next room. Glorian followed faithfully.

"See?" I go. "I told you I wasn't going to be killed."

"Yes, you did, Maureen. Saving is still a good idea, though. A hero must have more than courage. There is a time for prudence as well."

"Maybe. Now, you said something about a promotion?"

"Yes. The Invisible Gooley Thing was worth a hundred and twelve points to a Stalwart 1st Grade. You are now a Stalwart 2nd Grade, with all the perquisites and privileges appertaining thereto. I offer you my heartiest congratulations, Maureen. Both your Hit Points and your Hit Points reserve have been increased, making you more difficult to defeat in battle. Also, you may l

one of these magic spells: Fireballs, Light, Jump, or Paralyze Monster."

I have this habit of chewing my lip when I have serious thinking to do. "I've already got a wand for Fireballs," I go.

"Yes, but the Fireballs will be more powerful if they're cast by a spell than by a wand. And if you learned that spell, you could drop the wand and take another object in its place."

"That's cool. What do the other spells do?"

"Light illuminates an entire chamber regardless of size, far better than the beams thrown from your lamp. Jump will teleport you a short distance-it could save your life if you find yourself trapped somehow. And Paralyze Monster does just that, except it doesn't work on all monsters., and on the monsters it does affect, it works only eighty percent of the time."

"Hmm." I could hear the thinking music from "Jeopardy" tinkling in my mind. "Okay, maybe Paralyze Monster, then. No, wait a minute. Jump. Yeah, Jump."

"Are you sure?"

Of course I wasn't sure. I'm like, "Give me another minute!" I thought about this real hard. I wanted to drop the Wand of Fireballs so I could pick up the next good object I found. I also liked the idea of Jumping out of tight situations. And Paralyze Monster sounded pretty handy too. I didn't think I needed Light, so at least I'd eliminated one out of four.

"Maureen?" he goes.

"I'm working on it! Jeez, Brad! I mean, Glorian!" I debated with myself a little more. It was a tough call, like would you rather spend an entire week all alone with no money in Paris, or eight hours in Paramus, New Jersey, with Mel Gibson.

I went with Paralyze Monster. So shoot me. Glorian showed me how to write the spell on the Magic Parchment.

After that, the path got more complicated. The rooms didn't lead off each other in a nice straight line anymore. We were in a huge, confusing maze. I hoped Glorian was leaving a trail of bread crumbs or something, because if we were depending on my Girl Scout training to find the way back up to The Real World, well, I was going to get like real sick of food and drink a few days before I starved to death in this subterranean playground.

And I'd like to have a few words with whoever designed those monsters. I mean, except for the fact that any one of them could've, you know, kitted me-if I'd let it have the chance-they were all pretty ridiculous. I would've laughed in their faces if one: they had faces, and two: they weren't trying to, you know, kill me. When you hear the word "monster," Bitsy, what d

you think of?

Well, okay, either the alien from Alien or whatever it was that lived in the back of my bedroom closet I could've come up with better monsters than the ones I had to fight. Probably somebody thought them up real quick at the very last minute during a lunch break.

You should've seen the next one I ran into. Glorian and I came to a fork in the tunnel and goes, "Which way, Maureen? Choose, and choose carefully!"

"Does it really, really make any difference at all?"

"Well, truthfully, no."

So I go, "Then we'll turn left." That brought us to a small room. I could see a large metal shield in one corner, and a magic wand in another. Wow, like free gifts from the management took maybe three steps toward the shield, when the monster attacked. "Glorian-

He goes, "It's an Un-Dead Elvis."

"Thank you very much," the monster goes. It executed a little hip swivel and then did this Flying Mare from all the way across the room. That's a wrestling term, sweetie. You should watch wrestling sometime. It's got to be at least as realistic as those soap operas of yours.

Well, at first I hesitated to lift my sword in anger against like The King, but this wasn't a real Elvis-I don't think. With consummate grace and speed I sidestepped, and the Un-Dead Elvis fell to the ground. I graciously waited until it got to its feet again, and then I chopped it into little tiny gory pieces. It looked at me as its life ebbed slowly away. In a tiny, weak voice it gasped, "Thank you very much." And then it died.

Aw, Bitsy! C'mon! You're crying for a monster! Jeez, okay, pretend it wasn't an Un-Dead Elvis. Pretend it was, oh, an Un-Dead Vanilla Ice, if it makes you feel better.

Try real hard. You'll remember.

So now there was a wand and a shield in the room, and some sapphires and a new scroll and a package of food. Glorian got a second shopping bag and put the jewels in it. He told me I could take the food and it wouldn't count toward my total of items. The scroll was a Spell of Flatulence; and I went "Ew!" and dropped it.

Just as I was going to pick up the shield, something attacked me from behind. I never saw what it was, because I fell facedown on the filthy, cold floor, and Old Betsy went flying out of my hand. I got to my knees, but before I could stand up again, the monster killed me.

It killed me. Bitsy, I'm not trying to be funny. I was like, you know, way dead.

Honestly, honey, I don't really remember much about it. It was pretty vague-being dead, mean. It was a lot like homeroom would be on the first day at a new school. You know, you just sort of sitting around waiting for things to start, but you don't know anybody to talk to and you don't really know what's going on.

Thank God I let Glorian talk me into saving. He sure rescued my fabulous butt that time. The next thing I knew, I'm like, "You can resurrect me? How do our community's spiritual leaders feel about that?"

"All right," he goes. "Now you can enter fearlessly into that room."

I go, "Wow! Like *déjà vu!*" I was back in time, right before I went into the chamber with the Invisible Gooney Thing. Which was, let's face it, kind of a drag because I had to fight it all over again, and then the Un-Dead Elvis.

The second time around, though, I was ready for whatever had made that dastardly and unprovoked attack on my unguarded behind. It turned out to be a Golden Elf Gone Bad. That's what Glorian called it. It didn't look much like an elf to me. Not one of your Tolkien elves, anyway. It looked a lot like the lead singer from some Seattle grunge band I almost hated to see put on its dirty guck on Old Betsy, but I really wanted to teach it a lesson.

It was dead soon. And it was pretty chintzy with its treasures, too. One stone, not even a jewel, and a small package of Kleenex which I didn't bother to pick up. I did take the metal shield that was sitting in one corner, and swapped it for my leather one. The wand was a Wand of Summon Demon, and I figured I didn't need that one at the moment, thanks anyway.

My eyes are done, and forgive me for saying so myself, but they are little short of legendary. Next, lips. I have a couple of neat little lipstick tricks, too, Bitsy, you might want to take notes. Now, the first thing I'm going-

Sure. Fine by me. live on in ignorance if you want to.

Well, after the Elf room there were dozens, hundreds of more rooms. They all looked pretty much the same. We went down more staircases, to the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth levels. The monsters got bigger and faster and smarter and meaner. By the time I confronted the Cookie Monster, no, dear, it wasn't the "Sesame Street" Cookie Monster. This one was huge and like really scary-I had to come up with a different strategy. What I did, see, was stop just inside the doorway and zap the monster with every charge in the Wand of Fireballs, just to soften it up. Then I closed in with Old Betsy. Even so, I was getting as much as I wanted to handle, and I knew that the monsters waiting further on weren't going to get any easier. I needed more weapons.

Visiting all those hundreds of rooms and killing all those monsters had given me a pretty

spectacular haul of treasure. Glorian was loaded down with four or five Bloomie's bags full of gold and jewels-and, believe me, sweetie, gold gets heavy fast. Those must've been magic shopping bags, 'cause the handles never broke. In The Real World, handles tear loose if you put so much as a circle pin in the bag.

I'd been promoted up through Stalwart 3rd Grade, Valiant 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, and Paladin 1st and 2nd. I'd learned more spells, and my Magic Parchment was almost filled up. I had a magic Helmet of Farseeing, magic Gloves of Deftness, magic Boots of Savagery-they didn't help me fight any better, they just looked whoa nellie! great-and finally, at long last, I found a suit of magic Fire-Resistant Armor in my size. Nearly my size, but close enough. I made good of my turn around, and I stripped out of the studded leather outfit and climbed into the armor. I needed his help to fasten it up. I don't know if he peeked at me. I hope so.

My supernatural guide did his rock trick again, and revealed another staircase. I started to climb down, but Glorian stopped me by putting a hand on my arm. "Maureen," he goes, "however this turns out, I want you to know that it's been an honor and a pleasure to accompany you this far."

"Hey!" I go. "like what does that mean? It sounds like you're bailing out on me now."

He shook his head. "No, I won't abandon you. There is but one more room, and one more monster to battle."

"The Nightmare Critter. And the Treasure Beyond Counting."

"Yes," he goes. "Few heroes make it even this far. Even fewer make it beyond that final confrontation. I believe you are well prepared, Maureen. You are brave, true, and strong. You are fearless, cunning, and steadfast. You are shrewd, bold, and vital. You are clever, daring, and generous. You are undaunted, tenacious, ana--"

All right, Bitsy, all right! That's what he said, can I help it? He also told me that I was the Platonic ideal of all womanly virtues. Who am I to argue with a spiritual being? So he goes, "I have every expectation that you will triumph. Good luck, and may God bless."

Then, believe it or not, he shook my hand. I took a deep breath, turned away, and went down the stairs into the Den of the Nightmare Critter. It was the biggest room I'd seen yet, so huge that even after I cast the Spell of light I couldn't see the far corners or the ceiling. And, wow, did it echo! It smelled awful, too, like all the abandoned tires in the world were stacked up against the shadows and they were burning.

There were two things I didn't see. One was the Nightmare Critter, and the other was, you know, the Treasure Beyond Counting.

I turned back toward Glorian. "Say, pal," I go, "where the hell is this--"

It was the phenomenally deafening roar that gave me my first clue. I spun around again, like at first I still didn't see the monster. Then I did. It was a dragon. It was blue and sparkly. And it was about the size of your average collie.

"Huh?" I go. Okay, not me at my most eloquent, I'll admit. It seemed appropriate at the time. The dragon was sparkly because it appeared to be made out of cobalt blue glass. It wouldn't have been kind of cute if it weren't roaring and blasting fire and smoke at me. The fire was very bright and there was a lot more of it than you'd think a doggie-sized dragon could produce.

I started at the top, with the Wand of Fireballs, which I emptied into the Nightmare Critter without so much as making it flinch. I tried absolutely everything else at my command, including the Spell of light in case it was, whatyoucall, nocturnal or something. I may as well have been reciting the Pledge of Allegiance for all the good it did. Finally, all I had left was Old Betsy, but that was good enough for me.

I waded into that dragon with all my might. I hacked and hewed and slashed and chopped and cut for what seemed like hours, and I didn't make Dent One in the dragon's glass hide. In the meantime, it was crisping me up pretty good, even though I was wearing Fire-Resistant Armor. I had to dash back out of range now and then to slap at my smoldering boots and gloves.

Glorian goes, "None of the spells you know can defeat this creature, Maureen, even in concert. In any event, you are out of Hex Points."

"Now you tell me," I go.

"And the dragon is completely impervious to your swordplay."

"Now you tell me. Say, why don't you give me some help, for a change?"

His voice gets kind of sad "Even if I were allowed, I am powerless against blue glass. And if the dragon kills you now, I won't be able to restore you."

Suddenly, I felt just the least bit, you know, like doomed.

Glorian goes, "You should've saved before you entered this room."

"Now you tell me. Got any like useful hints, pal?"

"Yes. Fortunately, you once had in your possession the single weapon that can destroy this monster, but you chose to drop it."

I thought hard, even while the Nightmare Critter was moving up on me, shrieking and fur

and bellowing and blasting me with fire. I realized that I had been slowly retreating, and I almost pinned against the wall. "That scroll! The Scroll of Glass Breaking, the one that appeared .when I killed the Invisible Goey Thing."

"You'll have to find it, Maureen."

The goddamn scroll was all the way up on the first or second level. I started edging toward the door, and the blue glass dragon followed, shooting flames at me the whole time. I made out of the chamber and started up the stairs. The dragon kept pace. I retraced my steps through all the rooms, up all the staircases, and one by one my Hit Points were dwindling. It was like omigod! am I going to make it in time, or will I die the Real Death down here? And then nobody, not even my best friend Bitsy Spiegelman will ever know what happened to poor Maureen!

So I get to the room-the right room, the Invisible Goey Thing room-and I can tell you my heart just started thudding when I saw the scroll lying on the floor. I hurried toward it, but the dragon was just behind me. I could even hear it take a big breath. I-knew, I just knew, that it wasn't about to flambé me-it was going to incinerate that scroll, the only thing in this bargain-basement Wonderland that could hurt it.

I took this wonderful flying leap, Bitsy. You should've seen me! It was great, kind of a 9 for difficulty, 2.0 for technique dive, and I landed right on top of the scroll just as the dragon ignited. I felt the fire sizzle the armor on my back. Then it got very quiet, and I knelt and opened the scroll. The dragon was looking right into my eyes, drawing in another breath.

So I read the goddamn scroll, and the Nightmare Critter shattered all over the place into a billion little blue pieces, and from somewhere, maybe from hidden speakers up in the dim reaches above my head, I heard the "Ode to Joy." I go, "Give me a break, okay?"

So then Glorian comes up to me. He's smiling his Brad Pitt smile, and he's just about to say something.

I raised a hand and stopped him. I go, "I want to know one thing: Where the hell is this Treasure Beyond Counting I've been hearing about?"

"Here it is, Maureen, and it's all yours." He held out another scroll.

"It's a scroll," I go.

"Yes, it's a scroll. It's a special Scroll of Summon Taxi. With it, you can go anywhere you like. Anywhere at all just tell the driver."

"Anywhere?" I go, my tiny little mind already racing.

"Yes, Maureen, anywhere in the Known Universe."

"Like, say, Mars?" You know, Bits, that my glorious, beloved Prince Van is never long of my thoughts.

Glorian goes, "Certainly, Mars."

"Cool!" I took the scroll, opened it, and read it. Just like that, a magic Yellow Cab appeared. I was impressed. I didn't even have to leap out into traffic and throw my body in front of it.

Glorian opened the passenger door for me and loaded all my shopping bags filled with and jewels. I took off the armor-I didn't want to keep it, and it would look pretty dumb to Prince Van-and sheathed Old Betsy and slung her across my back.

Glorian goes, "Farewell, Maureen."

I go, "Farewell, Glorian. You have been a good and faithful guide. Thank you for all your help. Seeyabye." He was standing there, holding the door for me, so I took the dollar bill out of my brassiere and tipped him.

Hey, Bitsy, I know I had a twenty in the other cup, but, jeez, like I'm so sure Glorian did have change!

I got in the cab. The driver turned around and he goes, "Where to?"

"Mars," I go.

"You got it." And we were off.

We started driving away through gray, misty, unreal scenery, and after a few minutes I realized that I was filthy, scorched, and completely covered with blood and ichor. "Feh," I and then I told the driver to stop first at your house so I could get cleaned up for my darling prince. And that, sweetie, is how my very last and forever final exploit came to an end.

I don't have any idea how long it took the cab driver to deliver Muffy to my doorstep, but Lord! it wasn't long enough. When she arrived, she shoved her way into the house-my son, Malachi Bret, and I are staying, you know, temporarily with my mother. Then Maureen started begging and pleading for help to transform her from a tough-as-nails macha maiden into a f to-die-for elegant yet phenomenally sexy faux princess. She wanted to be the kind of woman her dearly beloved, the Martian Prince Van, would find like totally irresistible.

"And you know I don't carry cosmetics with me on my exploits," she goes. "I suppose I'll just have to make do with what you've got." The way she said that, you'd think my makeup

situation was only slightly less hopeless than death by lethal injection.

I showed her what I had in my room and. in the bathroom, and I told her she could borrow whatever she wanted. "Just don't touch my mother's things."

"For sure. They're probably not my style anyway. Let's just see what you've got." From my experience I knew that absolutely nothing would be good enough for Maureen, even if I had brought Max Factor and Coco Chanel back from the dead to give her a hand. She rummaged around in several shoe boxes filled with my basic makeup arsenal, making these little disparaging non-word sounds.

She looked at a plastic bottle of invigorating spruce elemental essence for the bath. "Aromatherapy, Bitsy? Like duh." That didn't stop her from dumping most of it into the tub as fitting.

"I have a chamomile after-bath gel for improving the skin," I go. "I don't know how well spruce and chamomile fragrances mix."

"Don't worry about it, Bits." She lowered herself slowly and carefully into the steamy hot water. "My skin's just fine, thank you very much."

"How I envy you," I go, in like my flattest voice.

"Loofah," she goes. I handed her the loofah. "Pumice stone." I gave her the pumice stone. It was like being on the set of General Hospital.

I'll skip the rest of the ritual, except to say that Muffy spent half an hour soaking in the tub, then another ten minutes washing her hair under the shower, and the better part of another hour doing a wax-on wax-off routine on every visible hair between her nostrils and the floor.

Then she started in on the actual paint job. She goes, "Bitsy, what is all this stuff? Don't you remember anything I taught you? Let me just say a few magic words: Givenchy, Lancôme, Princess Marcella Borghese. You've just got to stop buying your makeup from door-to-door sales ladies."

I shut my eyes tighty-tight as I struggled to keep from ripping her lungs out. I even helped her do her nails. After all the coats of base, polish-Flame Scarlet, one of my own favorite shades-and clear varnish had dried, I slued a small gold-foil Olde English "M" on the nail of her left ring finger and a little rhinestone on the right ring finger. If you ask me, I thought that was just too much, but Muffy never asked my opinion and I didn't volunteer it.

There was lots more, but the only real crisis came while she shuffled through my perfume collection. She picked up one bottle, sniffed it, and grimaced. "This is just so drugstore," she goes. "Who in their right mind would-" She stopped abruptly, and her expression-changed.

just that no matter how long you hang on to this cute novelty bottle, sweetie, it's never going to be a collectible." She settled for Paloma Picasso's Satin de Parfum. Mums had given it to me and I'd forgotten I even had it.

By the time she was dressed and ready to rush into Prince Van's brawny yet tender embrace, she'd spent more than three hours getting made up. To tell the truth, though, she did look almost spectacular. "In a hurry," she goes. "Gotta run. Say hi to your mother for me. Thanks for everything, Bitsy. This may be the last time we ever see each other, but please don't grieve. Be happy for me instead, okay? I'll leave the shopping bags of gold and jewels with you-I can always come back from Mars if I need them. In the meantime, they're yours. Kiss kiss!"

I opened the front door for her. I heard birds singing, and the breeze smelled of freshly-cut grass. Three neighborhood boys were playing Pickle-In-The-Middle on the sidewalk. It was a gorgeous day, except that the cab was gone. Maureen just stared at the empty driveway for a long time.

"The driver said he'd take you anywhere you wanted," I go. "You should've gone straight to Mars and not stopped here. That used up your one magic-taxi wish."

"Oh hell." If I didn't know her so well, I could've sworn she was on the verge of tears. She let out a deep breath, shrugged, and turned to me. "Know any good restaurants that accept rubies?" she goes.

Grace under pressure. That's my pal, Muffy.