

E M R Y S

JOURNAL

Boots

Mindy Friddle

I waited until the last patient had gone, then cornered the doctor in the examining room. It was the peach-colored room at the end of the hall, the small one, with a large detailed picture of a foot. All the crevices and mounds of the foot were labeled with long, complicated names; it always reminded me of the moon poster in my brother's room, all that shadowy, foreign geography mapped out and named by some crazy scientist.

Dr. Richard Grey Moore III looked up from the sink where he was washing, then looked back down at his hands. He knew why I was there.

"It's just a conference, Lisa," he said.

"A conference at a swanky hotel on the beach."

He sighed. "It's March. It's still cold. You'd be bored."

"Try me."

He wrinkled his brows, made a sighing, whistling sound. I stood looking at the foot, staring at it over his head. It was hard to believe people had so much trouble with their feet. The doctor had explained it to me once when I asked why there weren't any *hand* doctors. "Gravity," he told me, "just gravity."

"We haven't had a vacation together," I said. "We haven't been anywhere. For months now, you have promised—"

"Who would answer the phones?"

"A temp."

"Uh huh." He shook the water off his hands, dried them, and leaned against the sink. He crossed his arms. "You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

"Yeah," I said, and I wanted to add *all except what you're going to tell your wife, and I'll leave that one up to you.*

Back in the summer when I just started, even then, I watched him. One thing about the doctor, he could really move. He zipped between examining rooms, whispered orders to the nurses, riffled through the files and records they handed him, then entered the examining rooms smooth and smiling. I just knew patients were in there hanging on his

every word while he cradled their feet, scrutinizing them like they weren't even attached, like they were pets the people brought in.

I noticed how he tended to look serious when he talked, but with a faraway gaze, like he was thinking about something else. He was tall and tennis club thin, with thick brown hair he kept too short. Nancy and Lulu, the nurses, were a little afraid of him, but I wasn't. I knew he was keeping his real self inside, hidden from us. And I figured a man who let his wife decorate his office the colors of those little mints you get for free at the steak house—colors like peach and lavender and yellow—well, a man like that couldn't be too fierce. I could just imagine what their house in Holly Acres looked like—all in peach with a pineapple flag flapping on the front porch.

I decided what that man needed was a LA-Z-BOY, a leather couch, a large screen TV, and a game room for showing off the animals he hunted. I didn't know if he hunted or not, but I thought he should. And that's what I planned for us to do on our honeymoon. We would go on an African safari and have matching safari suits with cute, little, green pith helmets—only mine would have extra netting on it that would flow down the back like lace. We would come back with a zebra head maybe, or one of those goats with curly horns, a lion skin, and an elephant leg cut short with glass on it for a coffee table.

Early on, I had big plans for the doctor. One day, I asked him if he had kids. He shook his head no.

I said, "Well, I guess that makes you a DINK."

He stopped looking distracted and stared at me—hard.

"Double income, no kids," I said. "That's better than being a DIK. Double income, kids."

He tried to look serious, but he walked down the hall smiling.

Later, just as we were closing, the doctor came by my desk out front. Lulu and Nancy had already left, and I was closing things down. He said, "Why in God's name are you wearing those shoes?"

"I don't know," I said. "They're just my regular high heels." And they were. They were the Pic'n Pay faux leather blue pumps to match my royal blue Liz Claiborne silk dress. It was a real expensive dress, so I didn't have enough money to get the expensive shoes to go with it. But the dress was worth it—it had a snug and sneaky fit, and it set off my blonde hair.

"Do you know what kind of damage those do to your feet?"

"No," I said, relieved because it was like the script had already been

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written, like we were in a movie, and I knew my part. I followed him back to the peach-colored examining room. After a while, I leaned back and there was nothing to look at over his head but that foot poster as the doctor's hands and mouth moved up and down my body.

After that, on every Monday and Thursday at 6 p.m. sharp, we met in the same examining room. We never went anywhere else, not even for lunch. Just that same room. Some girls might have complained about that sooner, but I didn't. I felt pretty lucky. My other boyfriends never seemed to stick around long. And bad things always seemed to happen to them: One of them went crazy; one went to prison; and one went to California. But at least they took me places. Usually just once a week, sure, but that was enough. Usually a Waffle House or a cafeteria or Quincy's. Some place near the airport and all those motels.

But this time was different. This time, I knew I was in for keeps. Our trip together to the beach would get the doctor used to the idea of *us*.

Things went wrong fast. I mean, I can't believe a great hotel like the Hilton would get our reservations mixed up, but it did.

We ended up staying at the Budgetelle Inn. And it wasn't even on the beach. It was just a little box of a room with shag carpet and an acrylic painting of a crying clown over the bed, and an orange lamp, and a black phone. No pool. No cable. No room service. And in the top drawer of the desk (right next to the hotel stationery where normal hotels had Bibles), someone had left a big book called *The Second Sex*.

Just my luck. When I'm trying to expand our relationship a little and get the doctor to think of something besides sex, I find a kinky how-to manual.

"What kind of motel is this? Too cheap to even have a Bible." But the doctor couldn't hear me. He was taking a shower and singing something. It didn't even sound like English. When he got out of the shower, the doctor wrapped the thin, white motel towel around his waist. Well, almost around his waist. It was a small, thin towel from a cheap motel. I watched him stand there and shave. I have always loved watching men shave. I held up the book.

"You know anything about this book?" I asked. "Or this—I never took French—Simone de something?"

"I don't know," he said, "but if it's French, I'll try it." He looked at me, those smart, little black eyes boring into me, that wet hair tousled

so cute. I could have gotten swept away in the moment, but I didn't. I was serious. I was flipping through the book, and it didn't seem too sexy to me.

"*The Second Sex*," he read aloud slowly. "Well, if it means it only takes a second, it's not for me."

That got no response.

I watched him slip into his clothes: loafers, khakis, no tie. He said, "I'll be back soon. You be wearing that black teddy, okay, Sweet-heart?"

"But what about the banquet? Don't you want to go to the banquet?"

"What banquet?"

I saw on your schedule right here"—I waved the piece of paper I'd found underneath his wallet—"that there's a banquet after the seminar—"

He snatched away the schedule and stuck it in his briefcase.

"I'm cutting out early to be with you, Lisa. I'm just popping in the seminar this afternoon. I'm skipping the social stuff so we can have supper together, maybe at a French place."

"A French restaurant at Myrtle Beach?"

"OK, nix that. Maybe a little dinosaur putt-putt and a corn dog." He turned to the mirror and combed his hair. He smiled at me mischievously. The doctor looked good. Man, he looked good.

It didn't take me long to figure out *The Second Sex* wasn't an adult manual for physical relations, like *The Joy of Sex* was, which I had at home in my lingerie drawer. And *The Second Sex* didn't have pictures. I don't know why—maybe because I was bored, maybe because the TV was broken—but I started reading it. Before I knew it, I got through the first five chapters. A lot of it was whizzing right past me—but some of it was sticking.

I called my brother the genius.

"You're home," I said looking at my watch.

"Of course. It's Saturday."

"Oh, yeah."

"Even ninth graders don't have school on Saturdays," he said. "So how's the doc?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't know he knew. He was only fourteen. But then, he wasn't a genius for nothing.

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"Don't worry," he said. "Mom doesn't suspect."

"I know," I said. I had seen to that. I knew better. My mother could cut me to the quick with the single word *that*. Like, *Does that Tommy Brown have a job yet?* or *Is that Billy going to come in and meet us this time?* or *Has that Dr. Moore given you a raise yet?*

"I am twenty-one, you know," I reminded my brother, but he ignored me.

"What kind of conferences do podiatrists have, anyway?" he asked. "Fallen arches, fallen women?"

"Cute."

"Bunions—your callous friend?"

"You're on a roll, Genius," I said. "I hear you tapping on your computer. Who paid you to do his calculus homework this time?"

"Listen to me, Lisa," he said. He cleared his throat and spoke slowly, seriously. For a kid, he could really be irritating. "You should know that according to my computer-generated graph, aided by logarithms and statistical analysis, the chances of your relationship with Doc don't look so good."

"For heaven's sake," I said. "This is love we're talking about, not some quadriplegic equation."

"*Quadratic* equation."

"Whatever."

"Okay, forget the math for a minute. Let's focus on common sense. You're dependent on him, for a job, for a relationship—"

"Jesus," I said. "What brought this on? If I want a lecture, I'll talk to Mom." There was silence on the other end, and I knew my brother was sitting there shaking his head, peeling off the rubber of his purple Converse All Stars. "Well," I said. "I wanted to come here, and he brought me. I thought that was real nice."

"Where's 'here'? Where exactly are you?"

He had me there. "At the Myrtle Beach Budgetelle Inn," I said. "The Hilton was booked up."

"Yeah, right."

"Really," I said. "Really!" I snorted.

"Lisa," he said, "don't do that."

"Do what?"

"That snort-of-derision thing."

"Look," I asked, "who is this Simone d-e B-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l? That's why I called in the first place."

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“French author and feminist. Her dates are 1908 to 1986. Simone de Beauvoir was a life-long companion of Jean Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher. But I mention that as an aside, not to overshadow de Beauvoir’s own intellectual stature, which is quite formidable. She is perhaps best known for her work—”

“*The Second Sex*,” I said. “Right?”

“Right.” He sounded surprised.

“That’s what I’m reading. Right now. I’m on the part about bronze.”

“Ah, the division of labor. When women were no longer man’s hunting and gathering mate but his weaker companion. When the social and legal segregation began, when men relegated women to an inferior role—”

“Brutes.”

“Your word,” he said, “not mine.”

“Simone de Beauvoir says that people confuse the free women with the loose one,” I added quickly, my heart racing. After a pause, I actually *heard* my brother grin.

“Keep reading,” he said, right before he hung up.

I left a note for the doctor saying I’d be waiting across the street at Shoney’s. I took the book. The waitress brought me water and someone else’s order of coffee and grilled cheese, but I just ate it and read. I kept reading until the waitress stopped refilling my water and slammed down the check.

“You still waiting?” she asked.

“Simone de Beauvoir says the woman in love, much more grievously than the wife, is one who waits,” I said, looking up, but she had already moved on the next table.

I got up and used the pay phone to call the room. No answer. Then, I called the Hilton. I said, “Look, I understand you’re booked up, right?”

Some real polite hotel guy said, “Why, no, ma’am. No, we’ve got rooms. Shall I book one for you?”

“Just out of curiosity,” I asked, “was there a room reserved for a Dr. Richard Moore?”

“Please hold while I check,” the clerk said, and put me on that fancy kind of hold with music and I had to listen to “The Way We Were” almost all the way through before he came back on. “Yes,” he said. “Yes,

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there was a Dr. Moore registered for the convention, but he canceled his room yesterday.”

When I got off the phone, the waitress was wiping my table and seating some people there. I didn't even blink, just followed a family out the door like I knew where I was going. But really, I just knew where I *wasn't* going. Let the doctor wait awhile. Cheap son of a bitch. Even if he didn't want me hanging around the Hilton, there were other nice hotels around. I mean, at least he could explain it to me. I would have understood.

I followed the family across the parking lot and down the block. There was the father and the mother and little girl about five and a little boy about two who rode on the man's shoulders. I walked behind them, close enough to hear them fussing about what to see first, the mother saying there would be time to go to the Pavilion and the Gay Dolphin and Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum tomorrow, but tonight they were going shopping at the outlet place, and that was that.

The shopping center was called Galaxy Outlet! and it was crowded. I followed the family inside. Right between Ice Cream World and Sheet World, I found a pay phone, and I called the motel room again. Still no answer. I gripped my book tightly under my arm, shoved my purse strap high up on my shoulder, walked past Make-up World and Wicker World, and headed straight for Boot World. The family I had followed was in there, all of them trying on boots, even the baby, who was looking right up at me. I stood there staring.

“Hi, Cutie,” I said.

“Say ‘Hi,’” the baby's momma said. “Say our name is T.J. Say we're getting us some boots.”

“They make them his size?” I asked.

“Look around, Honey,” she said. “This here's Boot World.”

I walked down the aisle until I found a man high on a ladder unpacking boot boxes.

“I need some help down here,” I said, looking up at him. “I want some rootin', tootin', shootin' boots. I want some *real* ones.”

The man got down off the ladder, hoisted up his jeans by the belt loops, and parked one steel-toed boot on the ladder's lowest rung.

“What kind of skin you got?” I asked.

“Lizard, ostrich, 'gator, snake—”

“How about man skin?”

“Nope, not yet.” He grinned.

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"I want them, over there, those silver-toed, serious-looking ones," I said, pointing. "Are those for women or just men?"

"These here's for anybody wants to wear 'em," he said. "They're snake."

"I'll take them."

"But you ain't tried 'em on, little lady. Boots have to fit tight. They have to squeeze. Besides, these are 12 double-A."

"I'll make them fit," I said. "They're mine."

I stepped into them and stood looking at myself in the full-length mirror, turning this way and that. I opened the book and read: "There are few crimes that entail worse punishment than the generous fault of putting oneself entirely in another's hands." I looked down. These were the kind of boots the doctor hated, too narrow for a healthy foot.

I walked around Galaxy Outlet! a while longer. The book seemed to grow warm and heavy in my hands, and the boots in the shopping bag thumped heavily against my thigh. Every so often, I sat on one of the mall benches, reading a little more. On the way out, I stopped at Lingerie World. There were three women in line at the cash register, their arms laden with silk bras and panties and camisoles.

"Man encourages allurements by demanding to be lured," I hissed at them. "Afterward, he is annoyed and reproachful."

I went back to the motel, but the doctor wasn't there. My note was still taped to the door.

I walked into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror staring at myself. All kinds of ideas from that book were whirling in my head. I didn't feel like myself. I didn't feel like myself at all. "Giving herself blindly," I whispered as I blotted my lipstick, "woman has lost that dimension of freedom which, at first, made her fascinating."

Then, a strange thing happened. It was like a curtain parted, a door opened, and I looked through. Suddenly, I just knew the doctor wasn't sitting in some boring seminar learning more about feet. I knew he wasn't looking at this watch, noticing how late he was and panicking. And I knew he wasn't in any hurry to get back here to take me out and see the sights.

I stood there a bit longer, just thinking. Then, I got out the black teddy the doctor liked so much and put it on. I got out the boots from

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the box and put them on, too, leaving the balled-up tissue paper in the toes. Those boots were huge.

Finally, I got out the doctor's London Fog coat from his suitcase and put that on. Then, I walked the ten blocks to the Hilton.

There was no one on the elevator at the Hilton except a hotel maid who was leaning wearily on her cart of little soaps and neatly folded towels. "No man would consent to be a woman, but every man wants women to exist," I heard, then realized I had said it aloud.

"Ain't it the truth," the maid said. When the elevator doors opened, I saw the ballroom at the end of the hall. Those foot doctors were in there swigging their gin and tonics, miming their tennis backhands and golf swings. Seminar, my foot. You could tell that party had been in progress for hours. All that money because of *gravity*.

I stood there, one foot in the elevator, one foot in the hall, watching them. "What he do, Sugar?" the maid asked. She pressed the "stop" button and lighted a cigarette. The name tag on her uniform said "Lila."

I didn't say anything, just stood watching the party.

Then I spotted him, the doctor. He was talking to a group of people, probably about the wonderful work that wife of his did, what an eye for color she had, and how she was almost bringing in more dough than he was, if you could believe that.

I asked the maid if she would like a London Fog and handed the doctor's new coat to her right before the elevator doors snapped shut. I stood there wearing nothing but that darling, little black teddy, goose bumps on my arms, my nipples like bullets, and those boots which made loud, crinkling sounds when I moved on account of all that wadded-up tissue paper.

"It is a searing disappointment for woman to discover the fault, the mediocrity of her idol," I whispered, right before I headed for the ballroom.