

SHIRLEY



ISSUE SEVENTEEN
AUGUST 2020

FEATURING STORIES BY:

GALE ACUFF
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Three Flash Pieces: Peek, Spearmint, History

BY GALE ACUFF

Peek

In Sunday School today Miss Hooker said that when it's time for me to die it's God's will and there's no getting around that so the best I can do is to be ready at all times for Him to take me away and what's more be sure that at least I'll know where I'll be spending eternity, in Heaven or Hell and Miss Hooker's big on the first because she says she doesn't want me to suffer, which I would in Hell, fire and brimstone and torture and who knows what all Satan has in store for me so what I have to do is to get my soul saved but my problem is that I like to sin or just enough to have a little fun and make life and blessedness less boring and that's what I told Miss Hooker after class, *Can't I just sin until I can see over the edge the doom that's lying there and waiting for me to crash down on it since I'm smart enough to step away on time before I fall in?* That's when we got down on our knees, it was her idea, to pray about my *attitude problem*, that's what she called it, she took her glasses off and on the linoleum we were on the same level and we closed our eyes but I peeked, it seemed a bit like sin so I didn't want to miss out but even though I'm 10 to Miss Hooker's 25 I almost fell into the top of her dress, or to confess the truth for once, jumped but at that very moment she opened her eyes and said *Amen*, I mean at once, which was both good timing and bad, mostly bad even though if had died right then it would've been good. But that's religion.

Spearmint

After Sunday School today when I felt closer to God than on any other day of the week, which isn't saying much when you're ten years old and such a sinner, I walked home as usual but my folks were still in bed, they sleep late on weekends, so I had most of the house to myself. In my Father's house are many mansions says Jesus, the Son of God, and I guess the reason I'm religious anyway because one day I have to die and death is permanent unless, Miss Hooker says, you believe that Jesus rose from the dead, she's our teacher Miss Hooker is, and do most of the time, unless I'm depressed because I flunked a quiz at regular school or the druggist at the Five & Dime was watching me so I couldn't swipe Milk Duds or Goobers or Raisinets or gum, just some lousy spearmint gum, that's funny how when I'm sinning or trying to I feel close to God but when I'm good I don't give a damn about salvation. I'd ask Miss Hooker all about that but she'd say to pray extra-hard about it tonight before I go to sleep and if I wake because I'm thirsty or have to go pee then pray some more, although she didn't say pee, it's a sin of some kind but I think that it depends on how earnest your heart is but what do I know, I'm failing fourth grade. But wouldn't it be funny if I failed every grade from here on out (is that possible?--I'm not too sharp) but still went to Heaven? There I guess a diploma doesn't matter, when you're dead you just have fun, not that I don't already but up there there's no one to tell you you're being too loud or annoying or reckless. For lunch today I scrambled eggs and the stink I guess is what woke my folks, who straggled out of their bedroom looking and even smelling like Lazarus. Some miracle.

History

When I grow up I'm going to marry Miss Hooker, my Sunday School teacher, who has red hair and green eyes and freckles and knows her Bible like nobody's business, and even though she's 25 to my 10 I don't mind, I'll wait 'til I'm 16 and splice with her at 31 and if she dies on me before I die on her, which is almost sure--that she'll die before I do--then I'll be sad for years until I die and then I won't, be sad I mean. Because I'll be dead, too, I mean. Miss Hooker says that up in Heaven we get brand new bodies. I don't understand exactly since nothing in Heaven is solid like it is down here on earth but then she goes to the new vo-tech weekends and drives a Buick and works full-time in the library downtown so she's no fool. And she's got all that beauty to go with her smarts and I wonder what our children will look like. But back to Heaven: could be that those new bodies we get will be so thin we'll never sink back down to earth and when I die and wake up dead up there maybe she'll be at my side to help me up if I need help, so she'll take my hand but if I squeeze too hard maybe I'll go right through her, which means I couldn't kiss her without my face passing through her face and couldn't hug her either because we'd wind up on the other side of each other and wonder for a second, if there's *time* in Heaven, where the Hell each other went and then turn around and see each other there where we were before, only I'll be in her place and she in mine and then we'll laugh and laugh and I guess maybe try again but much more gently or else we won't touch at all.

That is, if we can laugh, if we can make sounds at all. I hope so. I'll want to tell her that I love her and I can't do that here on earth 'til I'm all grown up, 16 like I say, shaving and driving and splashing with hazel and Right Guard and able to quit school and get a job to support her. Or maybe I'll stay in school and go to college, or join the Navy and she'll sail with me wherever I'm sent, Cincinnati maybe, or El Paso. And all along the way we'll have babies, red hair and green eyes and freckles, too, and they're bound to take after me some, I guess, but I'm not sure what, I hope not my flatfeet and lazy eye and hay fever and I can't stop biting my nails and that mole on my cheek, like a meteorite that bashed into the surface of the earth if my face was the surface of the earth, which it isn't, of course, I was just being poetic, like that *Song of Solomon* only not as long. On our wedding night we can play cards or checkers or Yahtzee and have anything we want to eat and as much as we want--we'll have money from our folks--say pizza and hot dogs and tacos and chocolate pie and Little Debbie Snack Cakes and popcorn and Nehi and pork rinds. Then I guess we'll go to sleep.

Oh--and we'll watch TV, satellite, and have a free continental breakfast and maybe stay another night. I don't know how babies pop up but I'm pretty sure you have to sleep together and that makes them somehow, maybe you have the same dream and that makes her *preg-uh-nant* and you go from there and before you know it one of you dies and one of you is left alone 'til that one dies, too, and your children grow up and they get married and sleep together, I mean with other children they don't know, I mean those children get all grown up, too, and make babies and die, too, and it's called *history* when you have a bunch of folks doing the same. Of course I might wake up in Hell--for ten years old I can sin with the best of them--but that's life. As long as Miss Hooker's happy and taken care of I don't give a damn but then again I'd like to find out if sleeping together in Heaven is how you make an angel. If Miss Hooker dies before I do then I'll visit her grave and think about when I'll be dead, too, and lie beside her, our two dead bodies I mean, but I won't cry because we're really two souls up there in new bodies in Heaven. We've just got to take care is all or we might as well be *really* dead. I hate when that happens.

Gale Acuff has had hundreds of poems published in eleven countries and is the author of three books of poetry. He has taught university English in the US, China, and Palestine.

Lilac Wine is Sweet and Heady

BY L. W. NICHOLSON

Sheryl eats her lunch of red pepper jelly and cream cheese next to the lilac bush in front of her office building. The air is thick, and the racing cars sound like a meditative ohm. She eats her crackers, listens to the whirring of the road, and navigates her loss. Ohm.

Something moves in the corner of her vision.

A piece of paper, shoved back into the middle of the lilac bush, waves at her. She reaches for it, thinking someone had left behind a note for a lover. "You are the butternut squash of my heart," it will say. "You are the rambutan of my eye."

The paper nearly burns her as she unfolds it. Six words. Sheryl counts them, concentrating on each line and curve as if she is staring at the last road map, at something sacred, at the inside of Joseph's arm. Her body trembles. Her palms are hot. Her cells are rearranging.

Amen and amen.

She wants to shout. She wants to spread flat on her belly and pound her fists and kick her feet against the grass. Her toothache is gone. Her thoughts strip away like the peel of an orange. Sheryl is all crisp and crackle.

Ohm.

Her legs float back to the office. She will show Joseph the note and count the number of times his pupils widen. He will ask to hold her hand, and she will tell him, "All in good time."

She is the tablet.

The president will want to meet her and award her with a medal. She will wear a navy dress with yellow trim, and the people will clap. She will walk for forty nights in wilderness and only eat berries and beef jerky. She will sit on a rock. Children will come to her, and Joseph will sit beside her, smoothing her forehead. She will tell the children that life is a darkness. She will give each of them a dog's tooth. They will cry and cry.

"Joseph," Sheryl whispers.

"Hmm? What is it?"

He does not turn around. Instead, he clicks on his computer screen. Four clicks. She sees pictures of women with long arms on his screen.

She stands there for a moment, imagines putting her fingers in his curly hair, licking his eyebrows, pushing him out of his chair, kicking him a couple times.

She cannot form the words. He smells like sage and gasoline. The paper is burning her hand. The office is full of laughter.

"Never mind," Sheryl says.

She rushes back to her desk and drops the note on the floor.

She picks up her phone to hear the many voices. The shipping was slow. The item arrived damaged. Ohm. It is hard to leave the house now. Every apple rots in two days. The website is down. The air smells too sweet.

All she can say in reply are the six words now crumpled near her feet, the words now pounding behind her eyes: "now what now what now what."

L.W. Nicholson is an educator and grower of tomatoes from Southeast Missouri. Her work has appeared in Smokelong Quarterly, Moon City Review, and others.

Sergej

BY TOTI O'BRIEN

It was quick like a summer storm, and it came with scents.

The jasmine, especially, growing up the wooden fence, drugged me with infectious sweetness, bringing up memories of my childhood and a treacherous sense of familiarity. Everything in his yard had the same charming flair, same muffled siren song.

His brown chicken laid large, sumptuous eggs he let me bring home, sometimes. Quite a dangerous gift... Only milk was missing to complete the nurturing dream I had stepped in. With a cup of fresh milk, just one, the spell would have been fatal. Thank god he didn't offer it. Still, escaping was hard.

In the house, soon enough, I met the flip side of his little Eden. In a porcelain tube—old style, with strange feet like paws, perched on four cinder blocks—there was a reptile. Extra-large

iguana? Not sure. A small alligator, he explained. He liked to take it for strolls, of course on a leash. Otherwise, he kept the door leading to the creature's den always closed.

It was the reptile, indeed, that smartened me up. Not whispering into my ears, like Satan did into Eve's. That's the proper of snakes and this was a crocodile. Alligator, I mean.

When Sergej left for the Caiman Islands, soon after our fling had started, he asked me to feed the chicken and water the plants, could I? I had the keys to the house. Once, I walked in for a glass of water and saw...

I didn't, in fact. Almost stepped on it, because it was so silent, so still. Immobile like a sphinx, the beast sat on the living room carpet, blending with its muddy colors, camouflaged within its curly arabesques. Had his master forgot to secure the donjon? Good lord...

My heart started to beat a tad noisily and I became uncomfortable. My legs softened, simultaneously urging me to run. Just a minute! Could the thing escape? A cat door was in the kitchen, through which I deemed it could squeeze. Could it open the chicken coop and attack the fowl? I knew nothing about its habits or skills, but I felt impending danger. Something seemed truly wrong, and I should do something.

Sergej had specified that he would be unreachable. No cell service, in the heaven where he would reside. The vacation was already paid for, he could no more cancel it though it occurred at a sort-of-unfortunate time, true, too bad that I couldn't join him. All was already booked, the colleagues who had invited him were peculiar, they wouldn't, I wouldn't... And we would be unable to communicate. Sorry. He would not call, not once, and I shouldn't try.

Sergej had been crystal clear, but this seemed the kind of emergency asking for exceptional measures. I dialed his number, left a message. He called back less than a minute later, in panic, his voice near and distinct. Help me, he begged. Doodle (it was his pet's name) needs to be locked in at all costs. Wait, he begged.

For what? I waited by the front door, phone in hand, dumbstruck by a sudden chill. Sergej said nothing more but I heard him breathe, and it sounded labored. I just kept my eyes riveted to the dark, scaly shape trying to morph within the furniture.

Maybe a couple of minutes went by that felt like eternity. Then, the animal slowly began to move. Like a snail, it inched off the rug and onto the wooden floor, crept across the room and crawled, leisurely, down the aisle leading to its cave. It strolled, steady and calm, with a touch of

resignation, I thought. Had it heard the voice of the master? Course not. In the den there was food, and the litter box. Maybe it wanted to munch on something. I prudently went along. We advanced in single line at convenient distance. Slyly, I turned the doorknob behind it. 'Done,' I sighed. 'Good,' the cellphone exhaled.

So he had lied. Sergej could make and receive calls, no problem. Why had he claimed he could not? I suspected the lady he had met at the airport to be not his colleague's wife as he introduced her, but a lover or girlfriend with whom he was bound to a previously planned holiday, zesty getaway he didn't wish to give up. Freedom was one of his absolutes. Sacrifice wasn't part of his toolset. He was a bird of prey and I knew it, because I was a prey.

About a week earlier, a stye had ripened under my eye. Something must have infected my skin and I secretly blamed the poor hygiene of his bed, coated with dog and cat hair, or else our sleepless nights, perhaps causing my immune system to fail. Petty of me, but I hated that annoyance. It was painful. I felt ugly, and depressed.

In order to fix my mood he ran me a warm bath filled with balsamic salts. I should just relax, he insisted, he would wash me. Of course we fucked in the bathtub, first tenderly and then with increasing passion.

He was wearing a quilt, that night, and he looked handsome. Like a kind of warrior. A pirate. As I said, he was a predator and that showed on his face. His body revealed other things. Childish plumpness, covert fragility. But he fucked me with fury, almost violently. That I liked, because I was a prey.

On the day of his arrival he urged me for sex. Right away, right now. We made love but he was elsewhere, I could tell, only anxious to reestablish his mark in case it had faded. Imperceptibly, sadness seeped in. Dumb, dull sadness.

He asked if I wanted him to come inside my cunt or my mouth. I hesitated for a second. He said, "I want you to get the taste of my cum," and I thought it appropriate, for I had just realized this was our last time. Then, it was fine for me to carry out something, like a goodbye note on my tongue. Deeper. Deeper. I remember driving downhill in a daze, leaving that intoxicating jasmine behind.

Afterwards I mused about his chicken, sometimes, or his garden, or the frantic sex we had poured over our distinct solitudes since the night of our acquaintance, when we almost made it outside, in an empty lot. Under flickering stars, his coat hurriedly thrown over the sidewalk. I mused about the first time, and the last, and the island that came in between, and the poor reptile on the loose, unwillingly spilling the beans.

Four years later, I met him by chance. He was exiting an Opera House hand in hand with a stylish lady, who resembled me a lot. He had aged, still he had kept his ravenous airs, earrings, long beard, old-fashioned guru's poise.

As he animatedly talked to his partner he looked charming, alluring. She looked fetched. She looked vulnerable, as she staggered on high heels. Unlike me, because I wear flats. I adhere to the ground.

I walk fast, so I passed them rapidly.

Toti O'Brien is the Italian Accordionist with the Irish Last Name. She was born in Rome then moved to Los Angeles, where she makes a living as a self-employed artist, performing musician and professional dancer. Her work has recently appeared in Bridge Eight, Little Somethings, Metafore, and Alchemia Poetica. Find out more at <http://totihan.net/index.html>