

Julie Ann Shapiro

Ziba

This week I dreamed of flag poles, empty, dewy, singular poles. Grandma's says it's a sex dream. But I'm still a virgin and I think there's more to it; there always more in these parts. The dream last night even showed a pole with a white flag. Ah surrendering images. It waved, it billowed, a bit inviting, almost a smile in the sky. And the face in it, lest I forget that... Never! A boy's face shown in the flag, if one can call it that. He had a dimple on his right cheek and the bluest of eyes twinkling like stars. And he said my name, "Ruby Lucy," and he asked me to dance. I said yes. And the flag dipped enveloping us in a hug. I felt his warm skin against mine as we danced nice and slow. And in the morning I woke up holding my pillow tight, ever so tightly.

And Grandma said, "It's a naughty sex dream and not to pay much attention to it." But I know these things. He's real enough. She said, "that thought alone spelled trouble," and insisted on taking me out for hot cocoa as if it that'd cure the night smittens. But it's worth a try, I suppose. I still can't get over the way his voice quieted all the night crickets. Why even the neighbors dogs relinquished their usual barking just for him. Why they must have like him too. Ah to have that kind of presence at night...

Grandma just told me to get a move on it and stop with all this dreamy business. Ok, Ok. So we head over to the coffee shop and I'm all giddy and skipping every now and then not caring how dorky it might look. The shop's the kind with outdoor tables under the most enormous trees making a canopy of shade. I pinch myself to maintain some semblance of coolness and I'm pinched back by a guy who I think works here. His name's Ziba. He's a cute, youngish teen like me with messy blonde hair that's almost dampened by the fog. I want to push it off his face. But I can't. I'm too shy. Besides, he's motioning us to a table under my favorite tree, the one with a sparrows' nest in it and a pot of lavender growing right beside it. Grandma shakes her head. I ignore her and order us all some hot cocoa.

My cup comes with lots of marshmallows in it and so does his. I watch

the marshmallows melt, soft goey waves of white and wish he could take the cup to his lips like mine, but the most he can do is whistle on his cocoa. Soft ripples form on the surface. I attempt to count the circles...four maybe five..."orientation" this is what he calls it...the physical manifestation from the other side. I don't care what you call it. I just want to kiss him. He's pensive like me, tapping his toes one foot under the other every now and then. I want to touch his and see if...if they'd be warm. Some "orientations" are that concrete. He explains he hasn't been long on the other side. I want to know why and how and Grandma says," that's rude ...questioning to no end," ...but it's just two questions. Ugh...She's so nosy today.

I call out to her, "Can't you go shop today, Grandma please! Don't we ah...need some tea?" She saunters a few tables away and says, "Why yes child, I do believe we need some more Green Tea Sencha or better yet some chai tea or would you prefer peppermint, or vanilla?"

"Grandma, just...go...anything will do..."

She takes the hint. Thank goodness. Ziba plays with his napkin. He forms a rose and hands it to me. It smells like a real one, but deeper scented, more earthy. It's a cemetery bouquet. No, it's a napkin. No. I'm dizzy. Death re-visited does that. Grandma's always taught me that new spirits sometimes usher in their confusion over their demise and that seers like me sometimes pick up on it. Nah. It's just a boy, a cute one, and I like his present. But my head is swooning. He makes a second rose, a third, a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth. I'm falling over. No fainting. I'm slumped in the chair. Time passes. Lights flicker around me. I hear the sound of finger nails scratching on a violin, a harp. Music. Yes, music and the boy is making it sing in my ears. He's bending over me, waving the paper roses above my face, my lips. The cemetery song he explains had a violin, a string quartet and he wanted to learn to play an instrument. And can I show him how?

I say, "I don't play one."

"Oh," he sighs and brushes my lips as if he's kissing me. I tell him it tickles. He misses that sensation so much that he cries. I attempt to wipe

the tears away but my hand goes through his face. It's so cold. I zip my sweatshirt up to my neck. He backs away. No, don't go... He hesitates. Hands on chair. Fingerprints form. I touch them. They're damp as the dewy earth.

He tells me he's named after a king from Greece. I don't believe him. That's Zeus. "Yes," he giggles. I like it when he smiles. He draws a musical note on the back of my chair, "F sharp," he says. I blush.

My grandma appears tapping on the chair and says, "Ruby Lucy, we need to go, "and now," she yells.

I tell Ziba, "Can you play an easier note?"

"Yes," he says, "will you be here tomorrow without her?"

I put my index finger to my lips, "ssh" and bow.

The next day I show up and he's sitting high up in a tree and swinging his legs. Red and pink rose petals rain down on me. Their perfumed scent has a touch of honey in it. He says, "it's from the cemetery and there's a bee hive there."

"Oh, I never heard the bees there on all the times my Grandma and I visited," I lied. Grandma never wanted us there ever. She felt with all the ghosts' visits we had enough death around us.

He says, "I have a piece of honey comb for you." I shiver a little and he asks, "Aren't you going to come up here; you're so far away?" I grab hold of the base of the tree and hunt for groves to put my feet in and slowly make the ascent. He whistles a violin concerto tune or so he says it is. I scrape my knees on the bark and he says he has band-aids. I mutter Grandma's going to be so mad and keep climbing. I see a bouquet of red roses on an upper branch with a white lace ribbon. I'd love to wear it in my hair or as a scarf, how thoughtful of him. I imagine braiding my hair and dividing the ribbon in half and making nice even plaits like I'd wear to our prom, our second dance.

I push hard against the tree and force my body upward, fighting the tree, making groves for my feet where there are none. The violin song grows louder, drowning out the birds. I tell him it's too much, "I like their songs too," as I reach out for the bouquet. I feel my grip slipping. Yikes. He says, "But it's for you, always for you."

The red roses turn black. I fall holding the lace ribbon.

Julie Ann Shapiro is a freelance writer, a prolific short story author with more than seventy stories published and author of the novel, **Jen-Zen and the One Shoe Diaries** (Synergebooks.com). She is the senior flash fiction editor of *Conclave Journal*.