

The sixth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2018

‘Sugar and Spies’

by Paula McQueen

...a huge success! Over 800 entries
were received for the 2018 prize...

parsonage grill



old parsonage



‘Sugar and Spies’

You've got me all wrong; the first thing I look at is a woman's mouth.

That being said, I haven't seen nearly enough individuals of the female persuasion, other than on a professional level, in years. I'm so buttoned-up all the time that it's choking me to death.

Nothing like a soulless job to give your life structure, is there? My manager has exiled me on a business trip all on my lonesome, and today the conference is finally over, leaving me with a free evening and one entire day to burn through before I head home. Sadly, when I'm not at work, I more or less don't know what to do with myself. I keep finding myself wishing I were someone else.

I remember who I was. Clever, raucous, yet completely in control – like some kind of genteel animal, cleaning his claws at the table in a three-piece suit, like some kind of spy. I feel jealous of what I used to be, if that makes any sense. Now I feel

utterly domesticated, and I hate it.

Yes, there are scores of attractive women at these conferences, beautiful, unattainable businesswomen. To my washed-up dismay, they want someone edgy, exciting – not a man who’s grey and stolid as the shipping forecast, which is what I’m afraid I’ve become. Unless, that is, they have some kind of a Daddy complex, which I’m convinced don’t actually exist except for in the dream-world of the impossibly wealthy and insanely famous.

I hate to find myself longing for the old days, but I do. I miss all the little sins – secret trespasses I still keep in my pockets, to take out and turn round and round in my head during the long plane flights that dominate my schedule. I feel like I spend about thirty percent of my life in a plane.

Yes, I’ve been suffering from a lack of real spice in my life – something lamentable, but definitely less than tragic.

I need to forget myself for the evening, perhaps even to walk away from myself completely for a while. I emerge from the hotel into a bustling cloud of people, and I immediately feel anonymous and free. Nobody here knows who I am, so maybe I can forget for a while, too.

The lively night-time crowd moves as if it’s a single organism with a mind of its own. As I let the tide carry me along through the maze of people, I see several of them ducking into a beautiful shining blue orb of a place on the corner, a sliver of a shining new planet. I don’t catch the name on the way in and I don’t care – it’s where everyone is going, so it’s where I want to be.

Everything feels as if it’s underwater here – all blue shadows and fog, silhouettes projected on frosted walls, the musical clink of glasses, the buzz of indistinct, strangely enticing conversation. Everything feels vertiginous and fluid, full of energy and mystery, and I’m instantly immersed in the atmosphere of the place – modern but timeless, mysterious but oddly comfortable. The convergence of scores of beautiful, unknown people in a beautiful, unknown place is pleasantly disorienting.

This is apparently a popular place, but I eventually manage to land a table that’s quite centrally located, perfect for people-watching. I order a drink and try to relax, try to soak it all in, to forget myself for a while.

I’m not there ten minutes when I’m pleasantly accosted by the scent of lilies and chocolate, the crystal bell sound of youthful female laughter. I look up, and clustered around the table across the way are five young women who each look like they’re straight from the cover of *Vogue*. They’re ensconced by a veritable jewel box of half-finished cocktails, and are sharing a couple of desserts that look like tiny modern sculptures. They keep leaning in close to each other and talking in low voices – and from time to time, looking straight up at me. And smiling.

I’ve suddenly started to feel more like the man I used to be – mysterious, alluring, a cipher to be solved, not a toothless tiger. That being said, as much as I love being admired by the opposite sex, I can’t just sit here stroking my bruised ego until it goes numb and they need to kick me out of the establishment

and into the gutter where I belong. Ha ha! Always the joker, this one. That's part of what ended marriage number two, no less! Additionally, there's the possibility that they're laughing at me. Do I have something on my tie?

Something about women crowded cunningly around a table licking chocolate off their fingers simply sets my heart to racing. They know I'm watching, too. Are they showing off for me? For each other? Well. I'm a gentleman – sort of – but I wouldn't mind so very much if you were all bad, bad girls.

They're enchanting – like an enclave of beautiful young witches in an emerald glade, grinning over a simmering cauldron, taunting me with their musical cackling, flashing their sharp teeth. Cackling is not the right word, is it? Not at all. Something about the raucous laughter of young women enjoying each others' company makes me feel both immediately self-conscious and intoxicated (which I already am). Delightfully wicked.

I'm sitting there thinking how happy I am that purple lipstick is in style when the waiter shows up unexpectedly.

"Sir, your sexy blue eyes." He places a tall, colourful drink on the table in front of me. I start a bit.

"Excuse me – what was that, again?"

"The ladies at the table across the way bought you a drink, sir. It's called a Sexy Blue Eyes."

"Oh. Oh, I see. How very – yes. Thank you," I say.

I look over at the table, putting on my best poker face. (I'm not nervous! This happens to me all the time.) One of the women, a slender white lily in a little black dress, smiles

widely at me, stops my heart with a feline, but friendly, wave of the hand. I manage a (hopefully) manly wave back (although it's impossible to wave in a way that's particularly manly).

They turn to each other, alternately glancing at me and then turning to each other, engaging excitedly in some kind of animated conversation that I can't hear at all.

What are they saying about me? I've always regretted not taking the time to learn how to read lips. That's a secret agent talent I wish I had up my sleeve right now.

I take a closer look, careful not to stare or, worse yet, leer. I don't want to scare these ladies off. They're all charming in entirely different ways – a bewitching bouquet of flowers in a bewildering variety of shapes, colours, scents. The sexy-but-smart-looking one with the ironic thick-rimmed glasses is my secret favourite, but I've never been a picky eater. However, the one on the end – the one who waved – she's the one who scares me. She's my real favourite, I suppose...Pale, slim hands with long, painted claws, almost black, but no – in the light, you can tell they're blood red. She sees me watching her, throws her head back and laughs, showing her sharp teeth like a little cat. I'll call them Green Eyes, The Librarian, The Cat, Practical Jill, and Wicked (the one who I distinctly heard using the words screaming and orgasm and looking in my direction).

The waiter returns. "Red-headed slut," he says.

"Excuse me?"

"It's the name of the drink, sir. I didn't make it up!"

"I've...never heard of that one. Thank you..." I look up.

They look back and laugh – not maliciously – and look at each other.

I’ve never had a red-headed slut before. It’s...fruity. Peachy, maybe?

I look over at the table, feeling considerably less bashful (and less sober) now, smile at them in gratitude.

In response, Green Eyes smiles, flicks her tongue over her sharp teeth in the most adorable way possible. Now you’re my favourite. You’re all my favourite. How drunk am I? I’m certainly feeling a bit...relaxed. Relaxed and tense at the same time, in about the nicest way possible. I haven’t felt like this in years. The waiter stops at their table again. The Cat sees me watching, leans over to say something to Wicked, who laughs heartily.

Am I blushing? I blush way too damned easily, but then again, that’s part of the reason why my second wife went in for me in the first place, little things like that. Maybe if I can get my multitude of faults to look charming, instead of ridiculous, I might just get off the runway. Look at me! I’m not Rhett Butler, I’m Ashley – the one Scarlett O’Hara really wanted all these years! Right? Right. Those two cocktails gifted to me from anonymous young ladies have got me dead convinced.

The red-headed slut, as it turns out, packs quite a punch. Five minutes later, the waiter arrives back at my table. He’s smiling. He’s starting to think this is amusing. So am I.

“Screaming orgasm, sir,” he says, unable to keep a straight face.

“I’ve heard of those,” I say.

“The ladies just gave you one.”

“Will you thank them for me?” I grin.

Of course, we’ve all heard of a Sex on the Beach, but Screaming Orgasm? Naughty, naughty girls! I’d be happy to roll around in the gutter with each and every one of you, believe me.

The unsolicited gifts continue, each with a naughtier name than the last.

Big O – strangely minty?

G Spot – once again, fruity. Orange and raspberry?

Green Eyes seems to be smiling at me the most. I’m so happy red lipstick is back in style. That forked tongue hiding behind those slick ruby lips. That tongue could make short work of any red-blooded male, to be sure. Am I bad? Oh, yes.

This naughty boy is in dire need of a spanking.

Finally, because it’s getting late and the place is clearing out, I’m able to make out something Green Eyes is saying: “That’s him. I know that’s him.”

Who?

“No, it’s not,” says Practical Jill.

“It is, I watch that show all the time. It’s him. I know it’s him.” Another vote in favour from Wicked.

What show?

“I’m going to talk to him. You’ll see. It’s him,” says Wicked.

“Don’t,” says Practical Jill. “You’re making a fool of yourself. It’s not him!”

Is it? Am I?

Fortunately, one of the only good things about me is that I'm a top-shelf liar, as long as I can brace myself a bit. That's not exactly the best strong suit to have. It helps with playing poker, and it may have sadly been quite helpful if I'd pursued a career in law, but it completely destroyed my first two marriages and prevented any subsequent ones.

Wicked is the first one to speak up. She marches over to my table with Green Eyes, with The Librarian trailing behind, smiling cautiously. The Cat and Practical Jill watch from afar, shaking their heads.

"Me and my girlfriend couldn't help but notice...I hate to be one of those annoying fans, but you're him, aren't you?" says Wicked.

"You're that guy from the detective show, aren't you?" Green Eyes chimes in, more hesitantly.

I just smile. I have no idea what they're talking about.

"The short one? The bad guy? The spy?"

I might as well give them what they want.

"You got it," I say. They smile radiantly at each other, clearly thrilled.

"I'm still surprised when people recognize me," I say.

"Really? It must happen all the time," says Wicked.

"Oh...sometimes," I say. Who the hell am I, again? "Not that often."

"We were just totally binge-watching your show last night when we were in the hotel. My friend is obsessed with you," says Wicked. "She's addicted."

"I am not," says Green Eyes. "Don't worry, I'm not stalking you," she smiles at me. I smile back. "But I do want your picture."

"Don't," says Wicked in a low voice. She turns to me. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't be," I say. I don't want to be one of those arrogant, inaccessible celebrities, do I? I'm a nice guy – disarming but charming. "Don't apologize. You just gave me a screaming orgasm. How could I be annoyed with you?"

"That... was Carla," says Wicked. I turn to Green Eyes.

"Thank you, Carla," I say.

"Carla's over there," says Green Eyes. "I'm Marissa."

"Pleasure to meet you, Marissa," I say.

I talk with them for a couple minutes, careful just to ask them about themselves and to talk about the show (what show?) and my co-stars in the vaguest of terms. I've never had beautiful young women take selfies with me, wonder if I'll see them floating around the Internet later, which makes me feel both extremely clever and slightly mortified.

After a few minutes, I notice that Marissa is quite friendly with Wicked. Quite...huggy. Normally, I wouldn't be so intrusive as to ask, but I'm perhaps just the tiniest bit drunk.

"I don't mean to be obtuse, but when you said "girlfriend," did you mean girlfriend friend, or girlfriend girlfriend?" I ask Wicked before I can stop myself.

"I mean like girlfriend fiancée."

"Ah, I see. And the two ladies at the table?"

"They're an item, too. Sorry to let you down, bad boy," she

says.

“Oh, it’s all right,” I say, try not to look disappointed. “Wait – if you two are engaged, and those two are together – who was buying me all the naughty cocktails?”

“That would be Carla. She’s bl.” She leans close to me and whispers with a sly grin: “She’s also married. And very drunk.”

I guess somebody’s getting lucky tonight. It’s not me, but hey! Who am I to resent my own fans? I guess the gods are laughing at me – but not too cruelly. It’s more like they’re giggling. I’m just light entertainment.

“Hey, you should come with us!” says Wicked.

“We’re going to a little place just down the road. I can tell my friends I spent the evening hanging out with you. Come on – it’ll be fun! I’m serious. You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

I do want to. This isn’t quite what I’d imagined, but I’ll be damned if I turn it down.

“For tonight, I’ll be whatever you want me to be,” I say.

