

Global short stories competition

May 2011 Winner

Jen Knox

The Code

I thought the new fridge looked nice. It was a creamy white, and it towered over Grandma's pale green fridge. There were a few magnets on this older one: images of fruit, a pizza advertisement, and a long white scroll that displayed praying hands above the serenity prayer.

"Why the new fridge?" I asked.

My grandmother gave me a hard look; her lips pursed only inches from my face so that I could see where her dark red lipstick had collected in the lines around her mouth. After an uncomfortable moment, she spoke, enunciating each syllable: "I made a huge mistake. This thing is awful. It's wrong, it's just wrong. What have I done?"

"Maybe you can return it," my sister said brightly. She noticed how distracted Grandma was and decided to make the most of it. She reached for the honey bear, squeezing its middle until a dollop of golden liquid landed on her palm. She licked and repeated, keeping her eyes on Grandma, waiting. We both could hear the steam that was beginning to push against the small metal door on the spout of the teapot; a soft clinging sound filled the room.

"No. It's done. I messed up, girls. This is awful."

I used my softest adult voice, the one in which I almost sounded like my mother. "Grandma, it's not awful. I think it looks nice. It's big, but it's nice and shiny. It looks better than that one," I said, pointing to the older, lesser appliance.

"I didn't see this number on the back. It's wrong. The number is all wrong." I must have looked confused because she stomped her size five feet on the linoleum like a child to emphasize her point, and looked directly at me as she added: "I am so stupid. You girls get out of here. Bad things are going to happen. You girls should leave. Pretend you were never here." She waved her hand in the air near my face. "Go watch TV or something. Get out of here."

My sister ran to the television, honey bear in hand, and began turning the dial, trying to find a channel with cartoons as I remained in the kitchen, turning the dial on the stove to extinguish the gas flame. I asked Grandma if she still wanted some tea, and she nodded her head, her gaze fixed on a small silver plaque that had a long number on it. She began counting on her fingers, repeating the numbers backward and forward. I left the room.

As Lana and I passed the honey bear back and forth, taking it to the head like two old drunkards passing a bottle, Grandma remained in the kitchen, muttering to herself. This went on for over an hour. After enough time and cartoons had passed, I figured it was time to call my father and tell him that Grandma was upset. I hesitated at the phone, whispering to Lana, "Should I?" She nodded. I didn't like making these calls because I knew my father didn't like receiving them.

After I had explained that Grandma was acting strangely again, my father sighed. "Are you sure I need to come over now?" he asked. "She'll probably snap out of it."

"Dad, she bought a new refrigerator. She's been in the kitchen staring at it for a long time. She's really upset about the code on it."

By the time Dad arrived, Grandma had copied the product number from that fridge at least a dozen times. "What on earth?" he began, and as Grandma began to explain her dilemma, I slipped the paper into my jean skirt pocket. Moments later, Grandma began to shriek.

"You see, Mark? You see, they've already begun. They stole my paper."

My sister punched me in the arm. She said, "You ass."

"Shut up. It'll only make things worse if you tell," I said, punching her right back, harder. As we exchanged narrowing eyes, we seemed to agree that this fight would have to take place later. My father was yelling now; his low, insistent voice the perfect contrast to Grandma's high-pitched worrying.

"I won't tell, but I will kick your ass," Lana whispered.

I pushed the paper deeper into my pocket. I was determined to see what Grandma had seen in the numbers because if I could figure them out, I could finally figure out why she was so damn strange. As uneasy as my grandmother made me, I was convinced that she knew things that the rest of the world didn't. I wanted to know them, too, and this was my chance.

That night, I studied the numbers. I noticed the way Grandma wrote the same ten digits horizontally, vertically and diagonally. I tried to find a pattern, turned the paper upside down and on its side; but after only a few minutes, my head began to hurt. I crumpled the paper. I held it in my fist, squeezing until it was a tight little ball, and I tossed it to the far corner of my room. I no longer cared to understand.

A few years ago, my grandmother was put on Stelazine, an anti-psychotic, to combat her delusions. What I didn't know as a child is that many of her decisions were made because she was being followed and tortured by a menacing woman, and that this woman purposely planted harmful things in her home; conversely, the woman would steal things Grandma was attached to—pictures, silver, and sentimental trinkets. The refrigerator was one of the many examples. It was the product code, the numbers—when added and multiplied the right way—that clued her in to the fact that something was wrong. The numbers were, as I thought as a child, a code to my grandmother. More specifically, this code promised an unnamed disaster: perhaps the fridge was now emitting some sort of harmful gas, slowly, so that no one would notice except Grandma; maybe the numbers would trigger a bomb in another state or country. Whatever the catastrophe, it was up to my grandmother to stop it.

These delusions have been revealed to me little by little over the past few years. Over breakfasts and coffee with my Grandmother at small hole-in-the-wall diners, she's come to trust me enough to share her thoughts—to an extent. When she first told me about this woman, she said that the two had met in her early twenties. She also explained that I would be in great danger if I shared this information with anyone else because the woman was insanely jealous “for whatever reason,” and had set out to destroy everything good in Grandma's life. She had infiltrated each job she's held, each friendship, and each relationship. Everyone Grandma loved was at risk.

As soon as she told me this, her first confession, she began to shift in her seat. “I shouldn't have said anything. Forget what I said. I shouldn't have said it at all.” And when my questions continued at our next meeting, this nervous energy returned. Ultimately, I realized that it caused her too much pain, and so I stopped asking.

My grandmother has a few possessions that have followed her since I was a child. She owns a few shoeboxes filled with yellowing papers. She owns a large painting of a gypsy, wearing a white scarf and big good hoop earrings. She owns many of the same—or damn-similar—blouses and slacks that I remember her wearing when I was young. She has also accumulated a few things, namely, diagnoses: Paranoid Schizophrenic, Obsessive Compulsive, Paranoid Personality and Depressive, to name a few. But despite her ever-changing psychological diagnosis, she seems more contented. She lives in a retirement home now, an old monastery that has been renovated. It is a retirement home that does not specialize in the mentally ill because her experiences in such places were far less than ideal. So far, it's working out well. The ceiling in her bedroom has a wide window with a simple, stained glass flower in its center, and there are beautiful mosaics along many of the halls and on the ceilings of the ballroom and library. When she described it to me, I could hear the wonder in her voice. She seems mostly happy there, and far more at peace than I can remember.

“The food is good,” she tells me the first time I visit. “There aren't enough men in here though. It's so unbalanced when you get old, dear. The men just die off so fast, and we women have to stay here and endure. We always endure.”

We spent that night looking through old photographs of Grandma and my great-grandmother. We looked at faded photos of her brother, who died before I had the opportunity to meet him. I helped Grandma organize letters she'd written by date and, testing my limits, I asked her if I could read one. “You are so curious,” she said. She looked down, to the right, and then her gaze vanished for a moment. When she returned, she said, “Not yet, Sweet. But maybe soon, as things slow down, become safer.”

For a time, I was infatuated with those letters. And, like the numbers she'd written in the kitchen that day, I began to believe that if I could decode them I might gain some insight. I held the paper loosely. Dearest,

I went to the market today. I bought ten cans of beans because they all expire on 6/12. Do you remember that date?

Our friend hasn't visited me for some time. She's left me be today. I realized that if I eat breakfast at exactly 6AM each day, she's less likely to show. Have you instructed her to do this? Do you want me to eat at 6AM? Maybe I finally have you all figured out. Or maybe I've done everything right. Ha! I'm getting old, dear, and I suppose I don't have much to say. Let me tell you—you were sure smart to check out early. If I had it all to do again, I would leave early, too. I would've had to live bigger, I suppose, to earn such a right. They say you people who die young are God's favorites. He wanted you back right away. I believe that.

I suppose I just wanted to tell you about those beans—they're safe on the third shelf. I'll move them down to the second shelf on Thursday.

Much Love,

B.

I read another letter, and another; no code emerged. As I read, I thought about how wrong I was to steal my grandmother's paper; I realized that, although my intention was to understand, my method was only feeding her disease. Although my grandmother still, and will probably always write to this man, and I might never figure out his story; although she still assigns evil to inanimate objects, accuses sweet elderly neighbors of terrorism, blames an unnamed woman for every minor distress in her life, she seems more at peace than I've ever seen. Further, I realized that to her, I have always been family. What I didn't get when I was a child, looking at those numbers, was that my grandmother was keeping me at arm's length for reasons that were, yes, illogical, but also intentionally kind. Even now, when I tell Grandma that I love her and kiss her goodbye, she tends to look around the room before telling me she loves me, too. She is still doing her best to keep me out of harm's way; her refusal to fully disclose her delusions is a refusal to share them.

Highly commended Aaron R M Ponce Philomena Remembers

Old Philomena woke up to a ray of sunshine. Every morning the sun would cast its first light through her old lace curtains, gently pulling her from the mists of slumber.

She would struggle out of bed. Time was not gracious to her body; her bones would grind in trying to rise. But in her mind there existed no sense of time; she was neither young nor old, constantly floating in the haze left behind by everything she has ever seen.

Philomena lived on the third floor of a rundown apartment in the district of Escolta. Escolta, once known as the Fifth Avenue of the Philippines, was once paved with champagne dreams and stardust. It was a few steps off Manila Bay, where once the Spaniards and Americans brought their priciest, most valuable goods to trade with Manila's wealthiest. It knew its zenith in the 1940's; in old Escolta's coffee shops and cigar bars old Creole families—descendants of the Spanish conquistadors, who managed to perpetuate Spain's former wealth and prestige in the East Indies—would trade sugar and cotton with the new American expatriates. Merchants from Shanghai would trade with aborigines from the Philippine north, who would supply them with lumber, paper and tobacco, in exchange for opium, porcelain and jade.

Philomena lived in this world. Her parents, themselves Spanish creoles, owned vast tracks of land in the countryside, where they cultivated hemp and coconut. The hemp plants produced a sturdy rope, sought after by the American navy; the coconut trees produced oil, which could be processed into lighting fuel, likewise a valuable commodity at the time. Philomena, being a woman, was allowed only a small portion of her family's harvests. Every month she was allotted 500 gallons of coconut oil; the rest were shipped to her brothers who traded in Washington.

Philomena was an enterprising woman; having previously met at a restaurant in the chic quarters a trader from India, she became interested in the uses of sandalwood. Its perfume was lush and heady; it intoxicated all those who smelled it. She had also met a Javanese merchant interested in Philippine jasmine and ylang-ylang; the flowers' perfume was sweet and lingered in the air.

From these—rich coconut oil, pungent sandalwood and fragrant flora—Philomena devised recipes for pomades and castile soap. It was renowned in Manila's elite circles; the locals thought it took away the stench of sweat in the harsh tropical heat, while the foreigners could not get enough of the exotic Oriental aroma. Fading from sight were Florida water and rose absolute; precious oils from the East were becoming all the rage.

She was able to open a small apothecary along the boulevard. From her own recipe of castile soap, she ventured into mentholated ointments, pomades, prickly heat powder (prized among clinics as a remedy for sunburn), and salves made of aloe (adored by vain women who sought to keep their skin forever youthful). So popular were her products that even the city's convents—supposedly known for their austerity—would add bottles of her cologne to the holy water fonts as an offering to God.

In the span of three years she was able to buy the colonial-style apartment where she had set up shop. She decided to live on the third floor; the second floor was her laboratory, where gentle gas flames burned perpetually as she boiled and brewed her creations. One could smell the rich scents from afar; it was a magical place, swathed in perfumed breezes.

No one knew back then what the Americans were doing in the Orient; why they had stationed themselves in Manila, only the gargantuan military power knew. Philomena was ignorant on these matters, but she really didn't care; politics was the domain of men. All she knew was that the American presence was good for enterprise.

Every month the American Navy would send a commissary to purchase huge crates of prickly heat powder and soap. Philomena made a good profit from her monthly contracts; she would supply the fleet two hundred crates of each product, each crate containing either a hundred jars of powder or two hundred bars of soap. She knew these that these strange white men—with their heavy uniforms and aversion to tropical heat—needed her wares; she derived as much pleasure from profit as much as

knowing that she relieved thousands.

One day a strange sight appeared on her doorstep. It was a man, who she could make out to be from the Navy; he was tall and imposing, and he carried his uniform well—his tunic was pristinely white, perfectly pressed and gleamed in the light. He smelled of pressed starch and had good posture. What struck Philomena about him was that his hair was neither red nor golden, but black as tar; his skin was a nice coffee tan; his eyes were almond shaped crescents. It was a strange sight indeed.

“Good afternoon Madam, I’m Lieutenant Bertrand Chang from the third fleet. I’ve come to pick up our supplies.” Philomena burst out laughing.

“A Chinaman in the US Navy? I’m sorry, I don’t take to pranks too well. Your English is flawless though, nary a Chinese accent.” Philomena could not stop giggling. “And please, do take off that uniform, it’s preposterous.”

The good lieutenant looked at her coldly. As though he’s had to explain himself before, he responded with a stunning calmness: “Madam, I am a citizen of the United States of America. My parents were from Canton, China, but I was born in the island of Hawaii. I can assure you that my neither my name nor color affect my loyalty to my country.”

Philomena was struck, and immediately embarrassed by her rash judgment. Giving him a curtsy, she immediately opened the stock room to let Lt. Chang in. He sent his men to load the crates on to the trucks.

It was then that Philomena noticed around Lt. Chang a strange aura; his face was calm, his eyes were bright. He had the faintest of smiles, but seemed happy and serene. He was gallant and a gentleman, and did not ask her embarrassing questions unlike the sailors she had met before. His voice thundered but soothed her. He was not at all handsome, but was breathtaking.

“Lt. Chang, I wish to apologize for my tactlessness. Shall dinner compensate for my rudeness? Should you have no constraints, please come back tomorrow. Would seven in the evening be convenient?” Philomena knew not what force pulled those words from out of her mouth; she felt warm all over, and beads of sweat started to form on her brow. Her heart paced, beating louder than the drums of forthcoming war.

“Please, call me Bertrand. Expect me to be on time.” He then left the shop, his clean fragrance still clinging to the air, as Philomena felt herself weak in the knees.

The following day Philomena prepared a feast; she first made a bouillon with clams and prawns freshly caught at dawn, spiced with chili and ginger. She then grated carrots and lettuce and dressed them with mayonnaise, a dish unfamiliar to her Filipino palate but which was all the rage among the American troops. For the main course, she braised a whole leg of pork in soy sauce, garlic and black pepper; she had heard that the foreigners were developing a taste for oriental flavors. She then steamed rice lined with bamboo leaves, and for dessert made custard from buffalo milk and duck eggs.

The good lieutenant did come. She opened the door in a white satin dress, a shawl of cream colored lace, and a string of white pearls. Her cheeks were powdered and her lips rouged; her hair was tied in an elegant bun. Her instinct pushed her to match his uniform perfectly.

For three hours they talked about the most trivial things; made jokes which they both found amusing; exchanged witticisms and views on life. It was as though they had known each other for a long time. He relished every bite—she had never seen someone so foreign who could take the heat of her spices.

In the innermost chambers of her mind, there was something so soothing about the act of giving a man something to eat. As she poured him claret imported from Spain, she felt oddly at peace with herself. It was as though an act of docile servitude was what she had been looking for all her life. It was the case, in fact—she had never allowed a man in to the sanctuary that was her home, and was never smitten by such a beautiful specimen of manhood. Her grace and elegance in unfamiliar territory surprised even her self.

“Have you a husband, or at least arrangements? I would not want to insult the man of the house by being alone with a woman. I dare not show such petulance.” It was a whiplash for Philomena; his question shook her from her trance.

She poured him a glass of port, which he declined; ah, such a gentleman, and such restraint! He was neither crass nor a brute; he was a kindred spirit. He was simply perfect.

“No, Bertrand, I have been much too occupied with my own affairs. I have not the slightest thought of such things. I have yet to find a willing suitor.” At that moment she decided that she has indeed found one.

“Philomena, please allow me to take you on a ride. I’d like to take you to the base, to show you where your merchandise goes. I see no reason not to.” She could not refuse.

She sat in the front seat of his truck; for an hour they drove to the naval base, all the while singing to ballads on the radio. Who knew that acts of innocence could stir emotions? Her head was spinning.

He stopped the truck, and they both got off. On the sidewalk was a woman in a sparkling red dress. Her hair was long and loose; she smelled of cheap whisky and tar. Bertrand extended an arm to her; she ran to him, kissed him on the lips like a woman with no morals, and smiled.

“Philomena, this is my wife, Huijing. She sailed over from Hong Kong. We’re going back to Hawaii in a few days, we heard that the Japanese were coming. I told her you could give us a tour of your apothecary, as she really loves your perfume.”

Philomena was crushed. She ran off and hailed a cab. She started to weep; all she could hear was the running engine. In the darkness of midnight all she could see were swirling shades of gray.

She had forgotten her purse; stepping down from the vehicle, she at least had the wits to pull off her necklace, and handed it to the cabbie. The man, not wanting to refuse this windfall, drove off. In the soft glow of the street lamp outside her store, Philomena finally understood loneliness.

The city was ravaged by the war. Like gods of thunder bringing forth destruction, Japanese bombs destroyed three quarters of Manila. Philomena’s apartment was spared; but Escolta would no longer be the center of commerce and luxury. It slowly transformed into the slums.

For the past sixty years Philomena would wake up and put on a white dress and a faded shawl. She would paint her nails red, rouge her lips and powder her cheeks. She would then look out her window; though the once dazzling boulevard lined with cobblestones and cafes has now been overrun with sewage and grime, she would look down and whisper to the wind: “Will you come at seven? You said you’d be on time.”

As the clock struck seven that night, she saw herself in the front seat of a truck, singing songs to the moon and basking in delight, to forever ride beside the man in the white twill jacket.