

Global short stories competition

October 2011 Winner

An Old Pirate's Treasure

Sharon Birch

My kids are asking for a go-kart for Christmas and all I remember is Uncle Bill and the go-kart he made for me and my sister Claire back in 1974. When they beg me, 'please mum', I have to reply, 'I don't think so'.

Uncle Bill lived with us when he wasn't sailing the seas. We'd see him once, twice a year maybe. He'd come to stay, smelling of stale sweat and whisky. I didn't like his prickly beard or the way he made us dig deep into his trouser pockets for sweets. He would grin his black teeth at us and make funny noises as we rummaged around looking for what he called his 'pirate's treasure'. There never were any sweets. When he'd had enough of playing this little game, he pulled coins out of his nostrils but I knew they had been tucked behind his fingers all the time. I didn't want his coins but Claire was impressed. She collected the coins, 'her treasure' in a beaded purse he had brought back from the South Seas. He gave me a necklace made of those curled up shells that are supposed to carry the sounds of the sea when you hold them up close to your ear. I never tried them out and I never wore it. My little sister was fun and I loved her. She had beautiful black curly hair that fell into my face when she cuddled me. She cuddled me a lot when we were kids and shared a bed. One year Uncle Bill caught pneumonia and had to stay with us for months which seemed like an age. His hacking phlegm-cough made me cringe. He had these huge cotton-sheet handkerchiefs that mum made me practise my ironing on. I imagined his green-brown snot crusted inside the creases and I made sure I pressed the hottest iron onto those ripped-up-sheets-for-tissues.

'Why doesn't Uncle Bill have a wife?' I asked Mum.

She laughed. 'Oh darling, old sailors have a lady in every port.'

'Why doesn't he stay with them, then?' My face flushed with the heat of the iron, hiding the heat of the hatred I felt towards him.

'We're his family Rebecca. It's our duty to look after him.'

And that was that. Our duty. We had to do our duty like good little Catholic girls.

When I was nine and Claire was six Mum let us have bunk-beds. Claire slept on top. It might have had something to do with my sleep-walking and wetting the bed, something that only happened when Uncle Bill came to stay. Nobody but I made the connection. He crept into our room late at night. I kept my eyes tight, so tight that I made myself see red and white speckled bits in the darkness. I could hear him whispering as he stood beside our bunk-beds. I knew he wasn't talking to me. I didn't want to listen but couldn't help but hear. I sensed, like an older sister does, when Claire's blankets were ruffled and then straightened. I could tell because her part of the bed moved and creaked above me. Sometimes her top blanket flopped down like a cloak and it helped to keep me hidden. When I dared to flick my eyes open I would often see the orange candlewick with random holes where we'd picked out the threads on bored sleepless nights. I also saw him. Rubbing himself. With one hand under Claire's blankets. I could feel, could hear, and could sense her as she squirmed about above me, his other hand busy seeing to himself and I would catch glimpses every time he leaned forward into my bed space.

'Ssshhhh. Ssshhhhh,' he said. 'Beautiful girl, my beautiful girl. My Clarabell. Uncle Bill's little treasure. Oooohhhhh.' His knees buckled as his hand juddered. I peeked and saw him wiping himself on her fallen sheet and watched as he tucked himself away. He pushed the damp sheet underneath her mattress. My stomach flipped as I saw it scrunched up above me, poking through the metal diamonds that made up the base of the bunk bed, the candlewick bedspread all creased and wet where he'd wiped himself. I moved over to the far side of the bed, my body against the cold anaglypta wall as I tried to shrink away into it until he'd gone.

I began to hate the longed-for bunk beds. We'd cried and pleaded for them but all it had done was make it easier for Uncle Bill. I don't think he would have touched her if she had lain next me in our old double bed. And I missed her light little girl baby-breaths against my neck and the touch of her silky hair on my skin as she slept safe alongside me. I think he didn't try it with me because of something in my eyes. He would look straight at me and I swear I could see his mind thinking me over. I knew I would fight and so did he. It was a sort of unspoken thread between us, joining us together in unholy alliance and because he did it to my sister instead of me, I felt like knowing was my punishment. He knew I wouldn't let him touch me so I had traded her soul for my own. It was a choice but I had no part in making it. I was too young to

understand it all when I lived it. I was too scared of him to say anything.

I made sure I was beside Claire as much as I could but as the eldest daughter, mum kept me busy with jobs and errands and I couldn't always take Claire with me. What he did when it was just him and her I didn't know but the thoughts of what might have been tortured me then and torture me now.

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On his next visit home he started to build a go-kart. He said it was our Christmas present. Claire loved watching him work but I just got in the way, like uncooperative kids do. They laughed as it took shape and together they hammered in nails and tightened the screws. He was home for only a few weeks and something had changed. We had both grown older of course but every time he visited, it was like starting over again. I think Claire managed to forget once he'd gone off on his travels. Perhaps she didn't think about the bad things when he wasn't there. He was so charming to Mum and to everyone who came to the house. When he wasn't doing those bad things it was easy for somebody to like him. He laughed, was funny and very generous. But I never liked him.

I don't know if it was her growing confidence or her realisation that what he was doing was wrong but one night I heard her say she was going to tell.

He told her, "Shush my little darling. I'm only loving you. What is there to tell?"

'I don't want to ... I don't want you to touch me anymore,' she wailed with a whisper.

I felt her squirm above me and I gritted my teeth, clenching my eyes as tight as my fists under the sheets.

'Now stop that nonsense. I'm not hurting you. And you like it. Don't you?' He said, telling not asking. 'Don't you?' She

squirmed about some more and squeaked, 'No.' 'Your

mamma knows I wouldn't hurt you. She'll believe me when I tell her that you're telling lies. Like the time I caught you stealing that biscuit yesterday. You're a very naughty girl, Claire.'

I hated him. Claire never stole anything. Yes, she took a biscuit. But she didn't steal. His tone of voice was like thick custard and it curdled my stomach as his words filled the air above my bed.

'She knows you tell little porky-pies, Claire. She won't believe you. She'll believe me. You naughty, naughty girl. I think you deserve to be punished. Tut-tut. What a naughty girl my little treasure

really is.'

I turned over in my bed, as loudly as I dared and let out my best sort-of-asleep-sigh. I pushed my face close to the wall and felt the pattern on the paper press against my nose as I willed Mum to come in but knowing she wouldn't. She never did. He whispered as he told her to think about what she had just done to him when she said no. Nobody says 'No' to Uncle Bill. He reminded her that she had been a very naughty, very bad girl and then he left.

I let out a genuine long sigh when I heard the door click shut. At least she had been saved. For tonight. When I heard her sobbing I told her to get into my bunk and we cuddled in. We didn't talk about Uncle Bill and what he did or said, but I remember that was the last night we ever shared a bed.

The next night I said to Claire, 'I'll sleep on top.'

Her eyes wide, mouth agape, she looked stricken as she waved her hands in front of her and said, 'No. It's okay. It's my bed.'

I knew then that she was too frightened to say 'No' to him again and she wouldn't tell, not yet, not then.

A few days later Uncle Bill finished the go-kart. He took me and Claire to Barker's Hill. He said it would be a great place to try it out. Mum told him to watch out for the main road and said we had to be back in time for tea. Claire was excited. I can't say I was but I wasn't going to let her go alone. Who knew what he might do if it was just the two of them? We both had practice turns, then it was time for the big one, from the top to the very bottom. Claire begged for the first run, even though I didn't want it. I watched him looking out at the road that ran across the bottom of the hill. It was always a dangerous place for kids to play. He hesitated and then I saw him grin as he stood behind her.

Claire's big brown eyes were wide when she set off and her black curls flew behind her as he gathered speed, screeching 'Wheeeeeeee'.

I'll never forget the look of glee on her face. He pushed her nearly all the way but before they reached the bottom he changed direction and let her go. I could see what was going to happen from where I stood at the top of the hill. I couldn't do anything as he directed her straight into the path of the oncoming lorry.

Uncle Bill ran to the accident and started making excuses straight away. He told the driver she had twisted away from him and he couldn't do anything to stop her as she flew into path of the lorry. He was wild, crying and calling, 'My baby!' By the time the police came, the driver and other witnesses all said the same thing. There was nothing Uncle Bill could have done as

the little girl veered towards the road. Bill looked at me, put his finger to his lips. I saw the black glint in his eye as he whispered 'Ssshhhh'. Did he really think I would tell?

She had died instantly. Uncle Bill cried his crocodile tears and cried them some more at her funeral. Then he cried them to mum. I couldn't cry.

Maybe it's time to let them go now as I tell my children Santa Claus won't be bringing a go-kart for Christmas. Not ever.

Highly commended
Kyla Fontenot
A Shade of Light

I hated those damn mittens Momma made me wear. As soon as winter forced its way into the Colorado Hills, my Momma would open that winter drawer which was full of mittens, scarves and hats just like clockwork.

“It’s gone be cold today girl, so yous make sure you dress proper like,” Momma warned. There was no room for sassin’ her back, but Lord knows there were times when I wanted to. I was fifteen years old, almost sixteen come December. That was the only thing I liked about winter, it brought my birthday with it.

I loved Momma. It was just that she had catered to the white man for so long, she had let her whole life slip by. Before Daddy died, he told me Momma used to be a singer when they met. But when his job transferred him to Colorado, she stopped singing and started playin’ nurse maid to white babies. There was no way in hell that was gonna happen to me. I was gettin’ an education and leavin’ this God forsaken place.

School wasn’t too far from where we lived, if you only considered the distance. But it was a long way if you even thought about the hard cold wind that attacked any open territory on your body that was stupid enough to be caught hangin’ out. I finally made it to school, took off my war gear and sat in my seat.

“Shantelle, don’t you have no couth girl, take those boots off,” Miss Tate yelled. I don’t why Miss Tate hated me so much. Her skin was as dark as mine. I went and took my boots off and returned to my seat. Underneath me was the leftover water from my boots, so I had to straddle my legs over it. Miss Tate started passin’ out the American History exam which I thought wasn’t till next week. I was plannin’ on not comin’ that day. I took the paper Miss Tate handed me and just starred at it. Every brown face in the room barred down and started writin’. I let my eyes take me to my piece of heaven, a small window at the front of the classroom. I dreamed of going places, meetin’ interestin’ people who wanted to make somethin’ out of their lives. My eyes began to become heavy as I watched the snow through the window. I decided to put my head down for a few minutes and rest. At that moment, the sound of the back door opening tried to rob me of my nap. For some reason I turned around. Immediately I was thrown off guard by a colorless face. Attached to this pink face was a long lean body which was sportin’ some mean threads. His hair was curly and blonde. But all those crackers have blonde hair and blue eyes: he was no

exception. He began to walk up the center of my aisle. I guess he didn't notice my leg straddled over my water puddle, cause he tripped right over it. That white dude fell and fell hard. Everyone in the class just stared at him. I guess they were afraid to laugh. But I wasn't and I laughed hard.

"Shantelle where's your manners?," Miss Tate shouted.

"Oh that's all right Ma'am." The white dude had spoken. He picked himself off the floor and walked up to Miss Tate and handed her a piece of paper. Miss Tate pointed to an empty chair which was right by the window in front of the classroom; my window.

"Class, this here is Peter Blake Jr. and he come all da way from Los Angelese, California," Miss Tate rattled on. I couldn't believe it, a white boy in a class full of black folk? Didn't he know there was a white school two miles away from here? I mean, wasn't it enough they took every damn thing from us, now they just move on in whenever they feel like it? I couldn't even look out my window no more. His pink face had stolen my only piece of heaven. The bell rang. I was glad; didn't have another class with old Miss Tate till later. I got up and handed my blank test to Miss Tate, gathered my war gear and left. My mind was racin', and I could hardly keep it from movin' faster than my legs. I put everything on, except my mittens and went outside. There he was.

"Hi, my name is Peter and yours?"

"And mine what?!", I snapped.

"Your name."

"Oh, Shantelle." We hadn't been talkin' for more than two minutes and this white dude was already getting uppity.

"This sure is a marvelous hide-away up here. You know I've never seen snow before, except in pictures," he said. I sat down next to Peter. Even though he was white, there was something different about him I couldn't explain. He seemed at peace. His blonde hair hung in front of his face, touching his eyes. His face was pointed as all white faces are; pointed nose, and thin pink lips that pointed at each corner. Despite all that, he seemed almost regal. As I scoped him out, he continued to talk. He asked about me, then he asked about my friends. Except for Gayle, who I could only stand for short periods of time, there was no one. My answer seemed to quiet Peter, so I began to ask him some questions of my own.

"What the hell is a white dude like you doin' in a black school?" I taunted.

“I didn’t realize that education set up boundaries.”

“The hell it don’t! Evidently you haven’t read the texts your people write,” I shouted.

“I don’t believe any of my relatives have written any books lately.” I was quite furious by now, and I wasn’t takin’ anymore of the mess this white dude was throwin’ out.

“Whatever. I got class.”

“Which class?,” he inquired.

“Poetry.”

“Great! So do I. May I walk with you?” he asked. I quickly said no.

“I need to pick up my books,” I fumbled. But I didn’t have to pick up no books: I just couldn’t let him walk me to class. I had an image to uphold. But Peter confused me. Yet I had to remember he was still white and I didn’t need no clue to figure that out. I got to my poetry class, and there he was...a bright white light in all that dark shade. Miss Tate had it in for me that day, but I guess no more than usual. “Shantelle I would like you to read this here poem for da class.”

Miss Tate handed me a long typed written poem. This sure wasn’t my poem, and I didn’t know why I had to read it.

“Go on Shantelle,” Miss Tate said. “Prejudice” what a great title and what a perfect time to read it I thought. I looked right at Peter. Now he would know what it was like being the minority. And I was goin’ to be the one to teach him.

“Go on Shantelle,” Miss Tate restated. I cleared my throat and began to read:

“It falls upon me portraying a fervent wind, alerting me of the pain that will soon begin. It will come and send chills up and down my spine; I will answer it, unable to decline.

I know that if I try to fight it, it will stab me in my back. Try to walk away slowly, but it is constantly on the attack.

Black mists of foam form and seep into my mind, bringing forth hatred that searches for its own kind.

Unwillingly it comes and unannounced is its presence, but oh yes, I can feel it, this numb

“Ness called Prejudice,” Pete chimed in. Peter had stood up and began to recite the poem without the benefit of the rest of the script which lay in my possession. With authority, he continued.

“It calls me violently without passion and I know I must face it, to show I’m not shunned easily.

But alas, it sees my faulty façade, and devours me yet again leaving nothing but unwanted animosity.

Mournfully, I call out to those who wish to hear, tired of the pain tugging like locusts, this is my domain, my fear.

Consuming all that is within me, shrinking me down to size: they look on as if they could never realize.

This is what I face day after tormenting day, Good Morning Mr. Prejudice, I’m glad you’re going to stay.”

Peter sat down. I couldn’t sit down. The inside of my mouth was dry and I felt dizzy. I took my gear and left. I made it to the outside, sat on my stump and put my head on my lap. I tried to figure what had just happened. A white dude had come into my school, stole my piece of heaven, invaded my space and then had the nerve to write a poem about prejudice and had me read it. Prejudice was something only black people know about and whites only laugh about. I felt a hand touch my shoulder. It was him. He began to speak with compassion.

“You know Shantelle you are a bright young lady, but you are carrying a heavy burden that’s weighing you down. You’re allowing the color of my skin to keep you from seeing what’s really destroying your life. You blame your mother for doing what she had to do in order for you to succeed in life. You see her as a black woman who lowered her standards, when you should see her just as a woman who loves you very much. You blame whites for creating this hatred that grown inside of you. But prejudice is no respecter of persons. Anyone can catch the disease. You have caught the disease Shantelle. Your prejudice is in the malignant stage, and if you don’t cut it out soon, it will consume you. Don’t allow this poem to come true Shantelle.

“Shantelle, Shantelle!” screamed Miss Tate as she shook me from my deep slumber.

“Where am I,” I mumbled.

“You are in school gurl, and you have slept throughout this whole history exam,” Miss Tate scolded. The bell rang, and I headed for the door. I heard Gayle call my name.

“I found this at my house. I guess I picked up one of your papers by mistake, sorry,” Gayle said.

“Thanks. You wanna come over for a bit?” I asked. Gayle looked at me strange like, as if she had seen a ghost.

“What’s wrong wit chu?” I asked.

“Nothin’, it’s just that you never ask me to do anything with you before.”

Well I’m askin’ now. Gayle smiled a wide smile and we walked out into the cold outdoors. I took the piece of paper Gayle had given to me. It was a poem entitled “Prejudice,” by Shantelle Oliver. My heart began to beat rapidly. My hands began to shake. I let my eyes take me to the last line of the poem.

Good Morning Mr. Prejudice, I’m glad you’re going to stay...”

“What did you say,” Gayle asked.

“Oh nothin’, jus mumblin’,” I answered. As Gayle and I approached my house, I saw a small light flickering’ in the sky. I asked Gaye if she had seen what I had just witnessed. She said no. My mind began to focus back on what had happened at school in Miss Tate’s class. I had a dream, didn’t I? Or was it?

“I don’t want this poem to come true. I want to be free to be all that I can be. I didn’t know I had let it get this bad, until now. Thank you Peter,” I whispered. Then I laughed. The biggest belly laugh you’ll ever want to hear.

“Girl who were you talkin’ to,” Gayle asked as if afraid of the answer.

“My shade of light.”