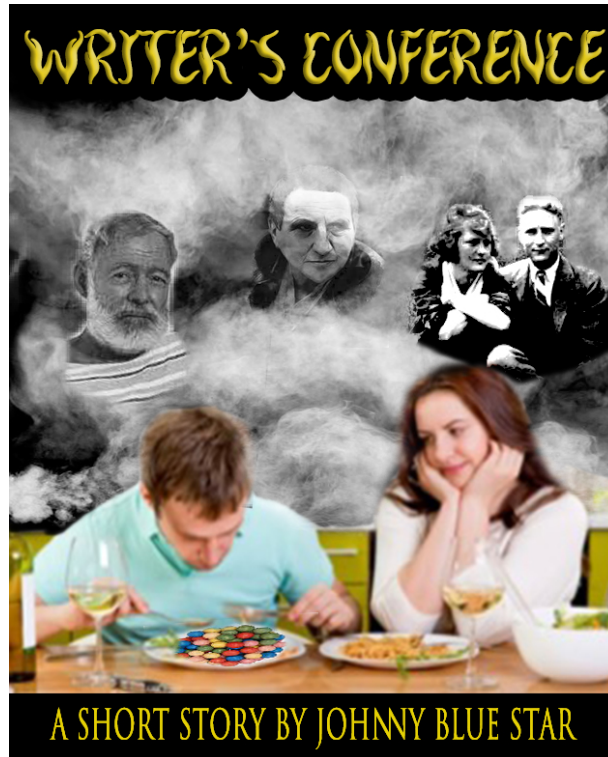


SHORT STORY
WRITER'S CONFERENCE
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Sylvia turned towards the boy on her left. He was chewing gum vigorously so much so she found it difficult to concentrate.

“Could you please-?”

“Please what?” He smiled at her kind of toothily.

“Take that wad of rubber out of your mouth and shut up. I’m trying to actually write something here.”

“It stimulates digestive enzymes. Helps keep my belly flat.”

“That sounds like pseudo-science to me.”

“No, really. It’s for health purposes.”

She glanced over at him. He was a little- chunky, shall we say?

“You look all right to me.”

“Fifteen pounds and I’ll be very all right. But my belly’s still hanging out there- and will continue to do so if you refuse to let me chew.”

“You know-“

“Marty-“

“You know, Marty- this is a very inane way to begin an otherwise rational day. I didn’t enroll in this very challenging creative arts summer program just to hear you break my concentration with those disgusting slobbering rubbery noises.”

“OK.” He stuck the gum under his desk. “What’s your name?”

“Sylvia- if it’s anything to you, you gum-chewing, time bandit.”

“That was a George Harrison movie.”

“Tell me what else is new.”

“I want to take you to lunch.”

“Good God, you mean then I’m going to have to listen to you actually chew up food.”

“Come on, Sylvia. I don’t know anyone here. I need company.”

“No, I have to make up the time I lost listening to you chew. I don’t have time to go out to lunch.”

“Look, I know a great little bistro. They make fantastic fish and chips. Catch of the day- and they have their own microbrewery.”

“Well, I do like beer, Chewbacca-“ (She pronounced it CHEWEY BACCA)

Marty laughed. “CHEWEYbacca! That’s rich!”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I’m hungry.”

“But aren’t we supposed to stay here for another fifteen minutes?”

“It’s a voluntary work study room, which you already turned into a playtime, time-busting room. So, let’s go.”

They wore down a lot of cobblestones trying to get to this place somewhere in the back of Banff’s downtown. There were all kinds of shanties and shacks here, hardly the place

for a bistro- but here it was, “The Marlin’s Spike- ‘Best Fish ‘N’ Chips in the Whole Damn World.”

Sylvia, who grew up in San Diego and had assimilated a lot of fish and chips, didn’t buy the ‘best in the world’ part. But she went in with the chunky boy and they sat down.

The waiter came right up to him, “Hey, Marty- we had a flood in the kitchen. Nothing’s going up for at least a half an hour.”

“No bother, Frank. Sylvia and I are having a writer’s conference.”

“Writer’s conference- that’s great. How’d the novel coming?”

“Slow.”

“You gonna finish this summer?”

“Dunno.”

“Hey, I can get you some bread?”

“Sure.”

Marty stuck his hand in his pocket, held out some fresh gumballs.

“Oh, no- not that again!”

“Try one!” he ordered. “These are from my father!”

“So?”

“My father always said, ‘Chew gum when you write.’ “

“I thought you were trying to rev up your digestive enzymes so you could flatten your belly.”

“That, too.”

“Is your father a writer?”

“My father’s- Pontius.”

Sylvia gave a little gasp. “No!”

“You think I would lie about something like that!”

She took a big red gumball and looked at it. “You know, this looks old!”

“It is old! It’s about seventy years old. Don’t worry- put in your mouth- and chew!”

“Pontius?”

“Pontius.”

“But no one knows who he really is.”

“I do. He’s my father.”

“This gumball tastes odd. Is there something in it?”

“Don’t know what’s in it. Don’t really care. Dad says to chew, I chew.”

She blinked. “Where did he get these…”

“Oh, he used to hang out with a bunch of guys in Paris. It was during the time of the resistance against Franco. They used to run guns for the resistance before they actually joined up themselves.”

“Who were they?”

“My father- look, they basically got into the gumball business to finance their operation. They moved thousands of gumballs throughout the United States and Europe- and that’s how they got their guns.”

“It was rumored that Pontius was one of a certain group of American expatriates. A lot of people said Pontius was-“

“Do you know how often I have to hear stuff about Dad? Dad values his privacy. He-“

Something then happened that Sylvia found difficult to explain. It was a subtle change in light. She looked towards the back of the bistro, where a stream of light struck the stuffed marlin by the bar. It kind of pulsed for a moment. When she looked back at Marty, he looked different- first indistinct, almost inchoate- then, well, she began to notice his jacket, which appeared to be a kind of hunting jacket. A gruff voice said, “Chew!”

The face was that of an older man with a beard. He was frowning, but there seemed to be a twinkle in his eye. But he wasn’t Santa Claus. He was some other type of creature altogether. “You have a responsibility as a writer to connect with the reader. You need to write more like you talk- and stop dishing out all these explanations and crap. Hey, get me a Bordeaux- oh, any damn Bordeaux.”

“Who the hell are you?” Sylvia asked.

A young woman scurried out of the smoke and leaned her head against him. "Papa, she doesn't know you."

"She's probably Generation X. They don't read."

"I read. Now who are you and why are you telling me how to write?"

The beautiful young woman looked at Sylvia and smiled. "I don't want to be autocratic but I would just open up my mouth like a little fish and take in the water. You'll find it quite nourishing."

"Zelda, I hear you've been painting again."

"I have. Writing, too. Scotty doesn't bother me anymore about it."

"I should expect so," the older man said.

"Move over," a very fat woman, probably in her fifties and dressed like a peasant woman, squeezed into the booth.

"I suppose your wondering, dear, where we all came from?"

"Gerty, for Chrissakes," the older man said. "Could you find a chair? You're crushing the daylights out of me?"

Somewhat telepathically, a waiter rushed over with a large, captain's chair. Gerty got out of the booth and sank into it. The Old Man and Zelda moved over and sighed. A young man slid next to Zelda!

"Scottie! Oh, Scottie! You were gone for so long!"

He turned to the others. "Gatsby III. Can you believe it? We do sequels here. But as to work," he said, staring at Sylvia.

"You're not--"

"Hush," said Gertie. "It's bad luck to make a point of it. That's what we're all trying to tell you."

Scottie smiled. "You need to imply more. Signs. Symbols. Metaphors. Similes. When you get so damned straightforward, you take all the poetry of your prose. All the mystery."

"And you are really a damned mysterious writer. In fact, mystery is your bag, isn't it?" Zelda said pointedly.

“That’s what I meant,” Papa said.

“Only use words if you need to, dear,” said Gertie. “Fill everything up with silence. You’ll do better- and you’ll sleep easier.”

“Do you think I’m ridiculous, trying to write short stories in this age?”

“Of course not. Stories- what was that word Aldous loved so much- perennial.”

“But are there any great short stories written anymore?”

“Yes,” Gerty said, “I believe you are working on one right now. That’s what Pontius said, anyway?”

“Is Pontius dead?”

“Dead? Heavens no! Do we look dead?”

They all laughed. Gertie swigged a bit from Papa’s Bordeaux bottle. She called out to the waiter. “Get me a glass of champagne. As a matter of fact, get everyone a glass.”

Gertrude Stein looked Sylvia right in the eyes. “Now, dearie, it takes a lot more energy and time to put a conference like this together. So don’t you dare disappoint us. No matter how frustrated you get, no matter how many voices inside of you tell you to put down that pen, don’t do!”

It seemed like a momentary zoom-in and zoom-out. In the future, it would be difficult for Sylvia to explain, even to herself, what had been happening in the flickering shadows and attenuated light of the *Marlin’s Spike*. But the waiter with the champagne bottle and glasses never arrived, just the waiter with a basket of steaming sourdough and fresh butter.

“Could I have another?” she said, indicating the gumball collection he still clutched in his right hand.

“No, I think you’ve had enough.”

“Is that for you to decide?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”