

“Ofelia”

by Ellen Keith



Ofelia chose a salmon-coloured dress for the wedding. Salmon because the ladies at her Zumba class said that the colour flattered her skin, made it shine like the copper coat of a lynx, because the priest gave her an extra wafer when she wore that dress to communion, but most of all, because salmon would clash with Chloe's fiery hair.

Chloe's skin was chalky white and dusted with freckles. The spots seemed to multiply daily and Ofelia imagined that parts of her bronzed son had rubbed off onto Chloe's cheeks. Javier could darken her face with his kisses, but that wouldn't make her any more Mexican.

She was Irish. And not even a proper one. While Javier wore a cross pendant, her neck was bare. Ofelia searched Chloe's purse for the Rosary, but instead found lipstick. And birth control.

Ofelia didn't just want a daughter-in-law; she wanted a daughter. A Mexican one, or at least a Catholic. Her chin had rumped into a frown the first time the word “daughter-in-law” slid off Chloe's tongue.

“Ay, Dios mio,” she had muttered.

“Tranquila, Mamá,” Javier said, tucking his fiancée under his arm, “Calm down.”

Ofelia knew it was her fault. She'd urged Javier to study abroad so that he could get a job with a powerful company.

She'd lined up some eligible girls for his return — ones who went to Bible Study each Tuesday, prepared the most savoury *molé* sauce, and had enough curves to ensure a brood of healthy grandchildren.

He returned with an engineering degree and a fiancée who could cook only boiled potatoes.

One afternoon, Chloe stood in silence at the threshold of the kitchen. Ofelia beckoned her in and pointed to a bowl on the counter. It was filled with egg-shaped balls of dough.

“Tor-ti-llas.”

Ofelia kneaded, rolled, pressed, and fried the dough into a golden disc. Chloe mimicked her, but her tortilla sagged, warped, and fractured. Ofelia sighed.

Later, Javier embraced Ofelia.

“Thank you for helping Chloe today. She's trying.”

The wind teased the hem of her dress as she stood at the edge of the jetty, staring out at the ocean. She heard the clamour of Irish voices. Chloe's relatives had discovered the swim-up bar.

The wedding canopy stood naked in front of her. In an hour, the resort staff would dress it with ribbons and garlands for the reception. The ceremony was in the chapel; she'd refused to see her son marry without a priest.

The soft patter of bare feet on grass interrupted her thoughts. Chloe carried the train of her wedding gown as she walked, and her auburn hair spilled across her face in loose curls.

“Are you ready, Mamá? It's time.”

Ofelia was silent.

“Mamá?”

Chloe tried again.

“Your dress, it's beautiful,” she pointed, and then hesitated. “It's — *muy bonito*.”

Ofelia reached out and lowered the lace trim of Chloe's veil over her face, concealing her freckles and pale skin. Then, she turned and followed the path towards the chapel.

“Sweet Summer”

by Kathy Gould



It was a busy summer day. Mother was running back and forth from the house to the yard. The neighbourhood children were over, all nine of them. In and out they went in all directions; all calling for help from Mother. Jenny was asking for her bike seat lowered so she could ride with some of the other children. She was the youngest in the group. The bicycle was a hand me down from her older brother. Jenny insisted she was ready to try it. The oldest children were riding the cul-de-sac racetrack.

It would be Jenny's only chance to play with them, before they went off to something more dangerous.

Jenny pleaded. Mother paused. Fixing a saddle seemed too challenging and consuming a task. Mother rubbed her forehead and tugged softly at her ponytail before committing another task. Jenny whined.

Mother's decision grew easier with each sway of Jenny's cries. She would get out the tool box and attempt to satisfy Jenny's pleas. As Mother entered the house, she was interrupted by wailing pleas from others. She could see that they saw her hands were free and she was unaccompanied. Liam wanted the water pressure on the sprinkler adjusted. Tomas and Morris needed dry clothes. Another few needed snacks and specific toys. Mother fulfilled the easy tasks and explained to the others that they will be next in line, after Jenny of course. Jenny waited. She found ways to entertain herself with the gravel at her feet. She called intermittently in Mother's direction.

As time passed, Jenny's patience began to swell and her voice began to strain with nagging appeal. Mother quickly responded, moving away from the other's with ratchet in hand to carry out the task quicker than usual. With each turn on the bolt, the ratchet hit the corner of the saddle causing the ratchet to slip. She bent over to get a better view of the bolt. In the background Mother could hear screams. A disagreement or possibly someone was hurt. Jenny too, was pacing back and forth as she wondered why her mother was taking so long on what looked like a simple adjustment. Mother's blood pressure was rising. Her mind digressing as she began to place herself in recollections of a less frantic moment to tame her mind. In the midst of her dreamy state, she calmed down. She felt pressure on her cheek. The ratchet had hit her right brow bone and cheekbone. At first it was the sound of the ratchet striking her face that caught her attention. Then the heat of the blood rushing to her cheek. Dropping the ratchet, she clenched her face. The pressure seemed to help to take away the pain. Jenny saw the whole thing. They ran to the freezer box together. Jenny felt like she was to blame. They sat down on the porch. Mother consoling Jenny while holding ice to her face. Over the next week Mother's eye produce new colours while she tried to hide these under thick makeup and the frames of her glasses.

SHORT SHORT FICTION (300 WORDS OR LESS)**“Reasonable Love”**

by Mitchell Hopkins



“But Darling, you're the reason I started smoking.”

“That's not funny.” She puts on her black heels and slips out the door without pausing. This is the girl he loves. He followed her to Anchorage so she could take a position at the new state gallery.

This is the girl that loves him.

He sits at the kitchen table, still facing the doorway but now looking down at his coffee cup. He racks his mind, trying to think of the thing he had to do today.

It gets boring at home. The local newspaper still hasn't called back; he managed to get a position at the front desk but the process seems to take forever. And what to do for lunch? They usually meet at 12:30 but she has a meeting today.

He thinks about how fast it all happened. She cried at the wedding. He passed out in the public washroom and the resort staff carried him out. And here they are! He recalls all the reasons she told him that she loved him. Reasonable love. What would that look like? Probably like running a business, something he knows nothing about. Finally he remembers the thing: he was supposed to go to the bank to open a joint savings account. For some reason the thought of it makes him sick to the stomach. He chooses instead to lounge around the house till four.

Reasonable love isn't very fun ...

“A Proper Burial”

by Andrew Thompson



Brenda staggered back from the garbage can, looking at the fresh bite wound in her hand with numb fascination. Two nearly bloodless rows of puncture wounds stood in stark relief, arranged in a tiny half-circle.

The small zombie thrashed inside the metal trash can, its milky white eyes locked on hers. It finally knocked the heavy metal bin over with a clang, spilling itself onto the pavement. It struggled to its feet, clutching a gnawed chicken bone in one hand. The child had been three or four when it died.

The creature had unknowingly set a clever trap; attracted by the stench of rotting meat, it had climbed into the can, burying itself as it searched for food. When Brenda had pushed the mass of garbage down, intending to make room for another bag, it had bitten her.

She tried to feel hatred for the zombie — and failed as it staggered closer, dropping its bone and reaching for her beseechingly.

She drew her hunting knife and knelt, placing herself at eye level with the child. With one hand, she grabbed its neck, holding it at arm's length. It struggled feebly.

With tears blurring her vision, Brenda spoke words she hadn't spoken for years, “I forgive you for what you have done, and I hope your soul finds peace.”

With that, she buried the blade to the hilt in the creature's head. It instantly went limp.

The city's garbage men would have disposed of the zombie with the other trash, but she would give this child a proper burial instead.

She cradled the wasted body in her arms, remembering the child she had lost so many years ago, and strode to the house to say goodbye to her family.

“Hail”

by Harley Morison



He came with a shower of hail. Out of nowhere the sky darkened and the air filled with tiny, destructive bullets of ice. The man, short and unshaven, grey and determined, stepped out of a hidden alley when everyone else began to take cover. The hail rattled to the ground mercilessly—more annoying than damaging—but the gruff, determined man didn't seem to mind. The hail was increasing in size and frequency, and it was seconds before the tiny projectiles that had poked at the pavement was now piercing through awnings and umbrellas. The street was almost entirely vacant. As everyone else ran into buildings, the man continued into the street without flinching at the sharp ice which cut at the cheeks and scalp.

It started to pile on the ground in gross, misshapen heaps. The pale, white piles strewn all over the street reeked of a dismal and foreboding air; like something out of a cemetery. The man went on and the sky darkened and a chilling breeze drifted in and the hail thickened and the street became empty all at once.

Empty, except for the man and someone else: a girl. No more than twenty-five. Nondescript. Quiet. Plain. Desperately trying to escape the street and the hail, but with no success.

Blood trickled from her head. She gasped and ran. He ran too. She didn't make it. In the street, something shattered. No one saw.

No one heard. No one cared.

There was nothing now;

he left with the

shower of

hail.