

James Beach

“Here’s to the Day the Muses Rule”

IN lieu of daycare, a dozen or so students gathered in the elementary school library after classes. Librarian Shagrynne shut down the bank of computers every day at that time. She felt anxious about what the 'net held within its mesh: unguessable beings and objects, objectifications.

The library at least was a concrete environment, a stable dwelling, a haven from the decadence of cybernetics. Everything in there, including most of the books, came from the previous century.

In her anxiety over user-friendly e-technology — the ring-tones and sex-texts, the digiphotos in the lavatories, the teenage kiddie predators online; those ubiquitous kids’ books and movies glorifying paganism — Miss Shagrynne did her best to uphold the upbringing of her youth. Reading and studying, writing by hand, meditation even, were acceptable ways to spend an afternoon, in her world. Video-gaming and R- or X- rated movies were the unacceptable ways.

As though the librarian were an amusing public access channel show, or a comedian, the kids in the library put up with her. (They had to.) Their assorted parents were of one mind: Latchkey Kids get into trouble; no way we’re paying strangers or slacker relatives for daycare.

“Storybook time,” Miss Shagrynne called. Today was a special day, more special than any of the previous; she was going to tell a story she wrote herself.

Most of the kids settled onto the spread of latch-hook yarn squares on their own; the librarian clapped twice at the stragglers, who spooked. Another set of claps and they found their squares too.

A dousing of the fluorescent lights, and the clicking on of an antique bulb lamp in Storybook Corner announced that Miss Shagrynne was ready to begin the day’s tale. She waddled her bulk to her plastic, ergonomically-designed chair, settled into it, gave a nice broad smile.

Her pupils mirrored the smile — to her, their variegated beams were pleased or questioning or timid, or imbued with sarcasm, or happy as a void, a vacuity indicative of those who would grow attractive enough to never stretch their intellects to full capacity. Instead of fixating on each child’s inner glow, though, the librarian preferred to compliment them, silently, on their physical flaws.

“This is a story about a painter and her muses,” said Miss Shagryne.

One of her students — probably the one with the delightful buck teeth; he was always goofing off — made a fart noise with his tongue vibrating between his lips. A few subdued giggles and then all was quiet again.

“Do any of you know what a muse is?” she asked the class, nonplussed.

Predictably, nobody ventured a guess. Everybody was interested to learn, though, and the class pitched forward its various faces. A couple of the littler kids looked downright terrified to find out.

“A muse is someone who’s not very bright. A muse is stupid in a lot of ways. But, a muse is very, very pretty,” Miss Shagryne told them. “A muse is what artists look at when they want to create something of lasting value. A muse has the gift of everlasting beauty.”

A girl with thin lips and lovely fat gums like caps on her teeth stated, “Our president’s a muse.”

Miss Shagryne could barely conceal her surprise as she asked, “Do you think our president is beautiful?”

The girl shrugged.

“I think he’s stupid,” offered a boy with a gorgeously nasal voice. “My dad told me he got C’s and D’s in school.”

“Did he now,” said the librarian. “And how many Ivy League schools did your father attend?”

“The president got his ivy degree because his family had lots of money to buy new buildings for the school,” added a perfectly jittery boy, with eczema. “He got out of getting drafted to a war in the same way.”

Their teacher taught, “There’s a lot more to running the country than brains, isn’t there?”

“Like what?” asked a stunningly freckled boy, before inserting a pinky into the left ear of the finely spacey-looking boy seated next to him.

“Like poise and parroting,” Miss Shagryne scolded. The loose folds of skin on her neck, wiggling ferociously, accentuated her glare. “Could you stand up all day long and act like a president, mister?”

“No,” he said softly.

“I could do it,” boasted the jittery one with eczema; he was probably shaky from too much stimulant medication. “I’ve memorized all the books of the Bible, and my Sunday school teacher says I’m the smartest boy in class.”

A girl with bewitchingly tiny squint-eyes said, “I know them all too.”

“I heard the president sneaks whisky shooters,” offered a charming plain-faced girl with obesity. “My daddy says those f.-funny cuts and bruises that sometimes show up on his f.-ugly face are from bumping into things when he’s all like good and loaded.”

“Mercy!” said Miss Shagrynne.

“I heard he drinks, and puts powder in his nose,” said another, running his hands through wonderfully wispy, fly-away hair.

Shifting in her seat for emphasis, and because her rump had numbed, the librarian said, “Rumors only hurt those who tell them. And such language! Four-letter words are forbidden in this classroom.”

Several students began counting letters in words — the librarian could see the wheels turning inside their skulls.

“So, ‘f.-funny’ is okay?” said the obese girl.

“But ‘okay’ is forbidden?” asked a small bony girl with a captivatingly large brow, in all seriousness.

“No s.! What the f. ain’t a four-letter word — ‘word’ is a four-letter word. ‘Four’ is a four-letter word. F.,” the buck-toothed boy sighed.

“Half the time I don’t know what the f. she’s talking about up there,” confided the spaced-out boy to his freckled friend.

“Children!”

“Does she mean we’re not supposed to swear?” said the squint-eyed girl.

“No, she means it like, any four-letter word,” the obese girl said.

The jittering boy added, “That’s what I’m getting out of it. And that’s impossible.”

Irked and somewhat embarrassed, Miss Shagrynne folded plump hands over her girthy, spread thighs. Again she took inventory of the blinking eyes of her pupils. She reasoned out their ages, between five and ten or eleven; she might be able to correct their defects of character before it was too late, if only she taught them the

right things. “We are drifting away from story time,” she said at last. “You do want to hear this story.”

“Oh, yes,” said a high-pitched meek voice, as if thrown.

“Please,” pleaded the petite girl with the big forehead.

The buck-toothed boy said, “I could hear it.”

So the teacher began, “A long time ago, there was a not-so-pretty painter named Pearl Pearbody. Pearl Pearbody liked to draw pictures of her beautiful neighbors. In her way, Pearl Pearbody was making up for her own physical shortcomings by creating beauty on canvas.”

“Wait, she’s ugly? not a hottie?” asked a kid with a very large backside, nicely disproportionate.

Miss Shagryne grew patiently stern. “She wasn’t born with a model’s body, is all. Her behind was too big, and her eyes were too squinty, and her gums showed red when she smiled, and her hair was too flaky and dry, and she had too many freckles, and a deformity in her spine gave her a limp. But nobody seemed to mind! Everybody liked her paintings of the beautiful neighbors. This was a long time ago, when beautiful people didn’t have jobs in the movies or on television, and they had to pay their debts just like anybody else, by farming or building log cabins, or sewing clothes or babysitting.”

“How cool, to be a muse and just sit there,” said a girl already blossoming with an alluring case of acne.

“And get paid for it!” shouted a girl who had an engaging little narrow nose, and a loose posture, like a high class whore.

“These neighbors — or muses, to use your new word of the day — these muses didn’t know to ask for money,” continued Miss Shagryne. “They felt happy to be captured by such a skillful artist as Pearl Pearbody. They spent days posing for her, all for free.”

The one with the big backside said, “I’d ask for money for that for sure.”

“So would I,” persisted the whorish-nosed kid.

“You’re mixing up the plot!” Miss Shagryne told them. “This all happened many, many years ago, before people thought the way you do. Can you try and imagine thinking differently?”

The students nodded that they could.

“Pearl Pearbody was real real smart,” Miss Shagryne went on. “She was so smart she thought up how to time-travel, all by herself, with nobody to help her, not even a scientist.” Here she paused, expecting some oohs and ahhs.

When there were none, Miss Shagryne dropped her ample stomach onto her lap for emphasis. “One day, she decided to test her time-travel experiment, and it worked! She traveled ahead through time, alone but unafraid, leaving her pretty and not-so-pretty neighbors, and her paintings and brushes and canvases behind.”

A few of the students yawned. Others were glancing about the room, picking at their fingers, or rolling their legs back and forth so their toes knocked together. The speedy kid had torn the yarn-knots from a corner of his latch-hook square and was now brushing them under the rug.

Miss Shagryne straightened her spine and, with elbows akimbo, slammed her knuckles against the back of her chair.

“What happened next?” asked the boy with fly-away hair.

“Well,” Miss Shagryne said, enchantingly, “Pearl Pearbody landed a full millennium ahead of today’s world. Do you all know what a millennium is?”

“Y2K,” said the jittery one.

“Nope,” said the obese one.

“The dawning of the Age of Aquarius,” the jittery one said.

“Nope,” the obese one corrected; “it’s a thousand years.”

“That’s right,” said the librarian. “A millennium is a thousand years.”

More glancing about, a few more yawns, the vibration of a mobile phone that nobody dared answer.

“Right away, Pearl Pearbody could see that many wonderful things had happened. World peace had been achieved, and nobody gossiped or told lies, or snorted drugs or drank whisky — especially not the president — in fact, everybody was so peaceful that they didn’t need to elect anyone to lead them. And everybody had plenty to eat and drink.”

The boy with the flaky, fly-away hair said, “How do you know?”

“How do I know? I don’t really know. This is a story; it’s fiction. What I’m doing is predicting what life might be like. Do you know what a prophecy is?” asked the

librarian. (She could see that they didn't.) "A prophecy is a smart guess about the future."

"That's way cool," the pimply girl said. "I'd like living in a future like that."

"All of us would like living in a future like that," Miss Shagryne agreed. "Except for one thing: Everybody in the future is a hundred times as beautiful as any of us. A supermodel from our time would look ugly there, next to all those beauties. We can't begin to imagine how beautiful they are in the future. We've never seen anything like them."

"Models are ugly," sneered the boy with the big backside. "All starving-looking, with those monster lips and they've got flat chests! and too much makeup on, always those weird clothes on."

The girl who had a whore-nose said, "Yeah; they're skanky."

"Skanks," put in the nasally boy, giggling.

Big-butt boy said, "Their pooh tang is too tangy too."

Two claps from the librarian. With teeth clenched she forced her face into a wide smile, which the gummy kid returned. Again, the buck-toothed boy's fake flatulence! And somebody's stomach grumbled, as if throwing its voice.

"So what happens, Miss Shagryne?" said the pimply one, this time with sarcasm creeping into her question.

"Once Pearl Pearbody got over the shock of everything, and had a bite to eat — time-travel makes a body hungry! — she asked for a paintbrush and a canvas, so she could start in on their portraits. She was so excited. Do you know what they told her, though? Can anyone guess?"

The freckly boy guessed, "They told her that nobody had a paintbrush or a canvas."

"No," said Miss Shagryne.

"Yeah, they told her they didn't know what a paintbrush even was," added the spacey boy, with a laugh.

"No, they have electronic paintbrushes and canvases," said the boy with the shakes.

"That's right," said Miss Shagryne.

“They told Pearbody to paint them in the nudie,” said the one with the enormous bottom.

“They don't ever get naked,” said Miss Shagryne.

“Why not?” came that high-pitched voice, as if thrown.

Placing her palms on the armrests of her chair, the librarian demanded, as if she were about to search on foot for its origin, “Who said that?”

The spacey-looking kid was innocent, by his expression, although the freckly kid next to him was hiding his face behind the spaced-kid's back, convulsing with laughter — or, he was hyperventilating...

Miss Shagryne could not think of the freckly kid's name, so often was she intent upon categorizing him by a physicality. “You, there, are you all right?”

The class began looking round, as if to assist with their eyes.

The librarian, meanwhile, had to struggle up out of the plastic chair and tap the freckled boy on his shoulder. Eventually, he stifled his mirth by biting the inside of his cheeks and turned to face his afternoon sitter.

“Are you all right?” she asked him again. The last thing she wanted was a lawsuit from the school or his parents.

He let out a laugh with spittle flying, again hid his face.

The obese girl, who totally covered her patch of latch-hook with her body even if she sat up straight, said, “He's fine. He's laughing at Brain's farting.”

“Well, Brian, you should really see a doctor about that,” the librarian said, as though she knew who Brian was.

“Miss Shagryne,” said the morbidly obese girl, “his name's ‘Brain’ not ‘Brian’.”

“Hm? Who ever heard of such a thing? Brain. Really.”

“Yep.”

Miss Shagryne waddled back to her seat. “Remember, children: every time you laugh at someone else, you're really laughing at yourself.”

“That's dumb,” said the boy with fly-away hair.

“What's so ‘dumb’ about it?”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s down to the principal’s we go if I hear one more word out of you, troublemaker.”

“Especially if it’s a four-letter one,” said the girl with beady eyes, gravely.

The librarian took a minute to adjust her flower-print tunic. “Now where was I.”

“What are they wearing?” the whore-nosed girl wanted to know.

“What are who wearing?”

“The pretty muses.”

“Nothing at all,” said the one with the big backside. “They’re nudie. Why wear any clothes if you’re a hottie?”

“They wear skin-tight body-suits,” the librarian clarified. “Like ballet dancers.”

The girl with acne said, “Without the tutus, right? I mean, tutus are like so old. (No offense.) Nobody wears them anymore.”

Miss Shagrynnie nodded, said: “These perfect-looking people of the future shocked Pearl Pearbody again! They told her that she was the extraordinary one, and that they’d like to paint her. They said nobody on Earth looked as beautiful as she did. They told her that in their world, since everybody all pretty much looked the same, nobody painted. Nobody did much of anything. All their problems had been solved centuries ago, by the last of the ugly smart people — people who these beauties had already forgotten ever existed, by the way.”

The girl with the tall red gums raised a hand to ask, “If the ugly smart people are all dead, what do the muses do when they get a new problem?”

“Their computers solve all their new problems for them,” Miss Shagrynnie stated matter-of-factly. “Their computers take care of everything: cooking and cleaning, heating and cooling, flushing their toilets. Wouldn’t all of you love to live in a world such as theirs!

“Anyway, these future people painted terribly. Any of you could draw as well as they could. It took a very long time for any of them to do Pearl Pearbody a little bit of artistic justice, let me tell you. But when they did, everybody rejoiced, and all the men there wanted to marry Peal Pearbody because she was so unique, and because she had time-traveled, all by herself, to the Land of Muses.

“But Pearl Pearbody, far more curious and intelligent than any of them, decided to do more time-traveling, instead of dating any of the muse-men. To her, all the

future people seemed uneducated, and boring, and she had nothing to talk about with them. All they ever did was sit around in groups at their fancy swimming pools, admiring each other's bodies, making love with anybody who catches their eye—

"They all have sex? with any body?" the buck-toothed boy asked, mouth hanging open.

The squinty girl said, "Sex is supposed to be between a man and his wife. That's what my Sunday school teacher told us."

Under her breath, Miss Shagryne said, "Oh, f."

"I don't see how sex could happen in a group," persisted the buck-toothed kid.

"Or with all their clothes on all the time," said the boy with the big behind.

The tiny girl with the high forehead wanted to know, "If a man puts his penis into her, won't he pee in there?"

"My mother told me sex was a myth," the pimply girl admitted.

The kid with the freckles put on a skeptical expression and asked, "Do babies really come out of a woman's butt? I saw this show on cable, and it looked like—"

"Does the president have to wear a condom?" inquired the flyaway-haired one.

"Sex is the same as kissing," declared a girl with an exquisitely twist to her spine. "I've had sex lots of times, but I won't kiss my brother. Grody."

"I think boys should marry men," said a typically mute boy with a gorgeous birthmark on his temple, like a bruise.

The whore-nosed one suggested, "Tell that to those skanky muses."

"Or to the president," said the kid with the fire-red gums.

Fat cheeks flushing, Miss Shagryne pulled a fingerprint-smudged storybook off the parti-colored shelf. She cleared her throat, gave a nice and broad fake-smile at the little impressionables on their yarn squares. "Once upon a time," she said, using the book merely as a prop, because she knew the tale by heart, "there was a young heiress named Sleeping Beauty..."