



Jon Pearson

Oil Fires

Fame dropped a nickel in the jukebox, and Sex appeared like a sheen of light. She came and went in a flash. But the *feeling* was she was wearing nothing but a pair of flip-flops and scooping Rocky Road ice cream out of a small, green-and-black carton with her pinky. That was the feeling. Money was chopping limes at the bar, minding his own business. Keeping to himself like a monk, amortizing away silently. (Amortize: to liquidate a debt in small payments over time.) Which, as a bartender, was exactly what he was doing. Plus Money owned the place. Fame, however, was stuck over by the jukebox. He wanted to write a short story that would turn everyone who read it into a blazing oil fire. So that when they finished reading, they would be nothing but a shiny, sticky, smoldering splatch of jet-black oil on a stretch of highway somewhere. Fame was a mean SOB. But that's what he wanted. And he was stumped and went over to play some music on the jukebox in hopes of getting his juices flowing. "Diamond Lady" was the tune he picked. An old favorite. Then he went back to his booth to write.

It was autumn and felt like autumn, the sort of autumn that sags in the middle like a horse's belly. Autumn, made of leaves and pumpkin pie and maybe big, leather three-ring binders and farm implements. *Damn it all!* Fame had been working at his story for over an hour and was getting absolutely nowhere. Nowhere. He was sipping a Pabst Blue Ribbon and staring

hard at the red Naugahyde booth in front of him and wondering where grandmothers went after they died, all the nice lovely grandmothers, all the grandmothers on earth if, for example, they died all at once. I don't know why grandmothers. I don't know why all at once. But grandmothers. And all at once. Where would they go after they all died? Fame wondered. Well, to heaven, of course. And he imagined a large solarium full of grandmothers showing pictures of their grandkids to each other, and there were doilies and foot rests as far as the eye could see and grandfather clocks. But, *damn it*, that wasn't going to start any *oil* fires anywhere. Shit. And "Diamond Lady" wasn't helping in the least.

Money finished chopping limes and was swabbing down the bar, licking his teeth, eyeing the women. He had a sweet tooth—a sweet tooth for women, that is. Plus he had that million-dollar smile everyone talked about. Working the cloth over the nice glossy bar, Money started reminiscing about all the women he had screwed and then all the women he *could* have screwed, *should* have screwed, *would* have screwed. Sex, itself, all seemed like a kind of Money now—coins, actually, lost in the cracks of a sofa. The world was one great big vast unending sofa, and sex was just loose change. Outside the window, past the blue neon sign, the moon *rose like a bald head in a dumb and blind sky*, Money mused to himself. Hell, Money should have been a poet.

The song "Shimmy, Shimmy" was pumping and jolting out of the jukebox now. And Sex had wandered back in. This time to stay a while. She had been outside, pondering the stars in her light-green negligee. It was October 3, 1958, in a bar ten miles north of Lotus Hill, Connecticut, if you need specifics, which you don't, since the scene happens everywhere and always. Sex came in through the back door, the screen door that went out to the parking lot. Actually, she emerged through a brick and stucco wall. But for the literal-minded, that may be a stretch. So, "back door." She was in heels this time. She changed every five seconds. She changed five *times* a second. She was Sex, for God sakes. And if that makes no sense, then maybe go get yourself some more sex. And do it *right* this time.

Sex, for the record, has *always* wanted to make the world a better place. In addition to a million dubious occupations, she has also been a schoolteacher, a secretary, a den mother, a godmother, a candy stripper, and even a nun (in a school play). Her deep-down, orchid-like self has *always* been a seeker of God. God *the-real-thing* God. God *reached-solely-through-subtle-ever-mounting-layers-of-tension-and-release* God. God *erupting-in-mind-exploding-pleasure* God. *That* God! I mean, come on, let's face it, she was Sex, after all. Talk about oil fires.

How about this, Fame wondered—in *the dim light of the moon, the sheriff's truck pulled up and stopped outside the...nah...shit*. Nothing was working. Nothing. And Fame now had to pee. But just then Sex plopped down in the seat in front of him. "Want some Rocky Road?" she mewed with a voluptuousness that sucked the air right out of the air and singed Fame's very

skin. And she, Sex, had these small, bangly, silver-and-turquoise earrings that destroyed matter on sight. But Fame wasn't interested. He had been staring too long at the red seat and couldn't get all the nice, lovely grandmothers out of his head, all the grandmothers who had all died at once, tragically, I guess. But, *dammit*, there was no sizzle to it—no sizzle at all.

“Hey, Cherokee”—for some reason he called Sex “Cherokee”—“what *happens* when we die?”

Sex had already left.

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