



now playing

stories by

SHELLIE ZACHARIA

now playing

STORIES

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keyhole press

Uno! / 9

Why This Isn't a Good Story to Tell / 11

Lizzie Sharpe's Nose / 15

Now Playing / 21

First Draft / 31

Stitch / 45

Nine Roses / 53

After Carlos the Continuity Expert Quit the Movie
and Headed to Costa Rica / 61

Request for Refund / 65

Juan Tomás and the Pale Yellow Letters / 73

Scarlet / 83

Vibe / 85

What to Do on a Saturday Night One Week After
Your Lover Announced "Sayonara, Sweetheart,"
Even Though He's Not Japanese and He Never
Called You Sweetheart Before / 91

This Is Us / 95

Cardboard Ben / 99

Making the Bed / 115

Take / 121

Young Woman Seated in the Art Museum / 129

Luckily, Lucy Sims Has No Stamps / 133

Blush / 143

The Guitar Case / 151

Dewey Classifies Love / 153

Cyrus Is Spinning / 161

Petals / 167

Round / 171

Lane 12 / 179

The End of *Stick Man and Hat Head*:
The Comic Drawn Almost Daily During Mr. Ryan's
Sixth Grade Science Class, Period 4 / 187

Parade of Champions / 189

Uno!

Wednesday nights there's a group of us and we all meet at Celia's house and she makes us dinner and we get wasted and play Uno. She likes to cook for friends, she says. We're not about to question or complain because we get one night a week where we don't have to dig in our own fridges and worry about if the coleslaw is funny tasting or just gone bad, and we don't have to order take out from Mercy's Tavern yet another night, especially since they fired the one cook who used to throw in free bleu cheese dip with the sweet potato fries. We just have to bring wine or beer and head over to Celia's and she's making enchiladas or baked ziti or

lasagna. One time Celia made jambalaya, which didn't go over well because she made it too salty, and we drank all the beer so early in the evening that Amy said she'd go buy more, but she got in a fender bender and called to tell us the bottles were all broken in her car and she'd see us next week. And Celia doesn't make chicken stir fry anymore because Robbie had an appendicitis attack that night which he falsely diagnosed as food poisoning until the emergency room doctor said, "Oh boy, that thing needs to come out," and so even though it wasn't food poisoning, Robbie associates stir fry with pain. One night Celia makes red beans and sweet potato curry soup, and she also puts some real good dope in the brownies and she tells us this when we get there so that we eat dessert first. And while we're playing Uno on the living room floor and we're calling out "Draw Four!" and "Skip!" and "Reverse!" and we're slapping down cards and thinking we're a pretty funny bunch of people and good looking too, then one of us, Theo with the goatee and sunglasses at night, says, "Isn't it great that this game brings us together in a circle, like we're all one here, you know, even though the name of the game is about another type of oneness?" Then he holds up his last card and shouts, "Uno!" before he tosses down a red four, and we all let out a collective "Argh!" and we just say, "Yeah, man," because Theo's a poet and sometimes he says what we've been thinking. He just says it better.

Why This Isn't a Good Story to Tell

See, you ask me what's going on, and I know you mean, tell me something good, but not much is going on. No stories to tell. Not one you'd want to hear, unless you count what happened two days ago and that's not really a story.

It's just about this old woman at the grocery store and how she couldn't reach the peanut butter because it was stocked on the top shelf. So while I was standing there picking out strawberry jam, I said, "Let me help you," and I asked her, "What kind do you want?" and she said, "Peter Pan, smooth, please." After I handed her

the peanut butter, she said, “You’re a little pretty and very nice.” Then she said, “Hold on,” and she reached for her purse, this beat up white leather bag sitting in the shopping cart. She took out her wallet and her hands were shaking and I said, “Oh no,” thinking she was going to offer me money, but instead she handed me a business card and said, “This is my grandson. He’s a nice boy. You should call him; he’s lonely.”

I looked and saw he had a nice boy name and he was a travel agent and he had a work phone and a cell phone and I said, “Thanks,” and put the business card in my own purse, which was just a little straw bag because it’s summertime. And since I’d had it with mean boys, it seemed a good thing to do, to call a nice boy, and after two glasses of wine that evening, I called the old woman’s grandson. When I said who I was and how I got his number, he was quiet. I felt stupid, but then I felt even worse because he finally said, “I’m sorry. My grandmother isn’t always well. I’m married. She forgets.” Then he laughed and said, “Or maybe she does remember and doesn’t like Jill anymore,” and I heard him say, “Ouch!” like his wife Jill must have smacked him on the back of the head.

I apologized and hung up and drank another glass of wine because he did sound like a nice boy. And I went to bed and it was another night like so many of my nights.

So you see, it’s not really a good story, not the kind you want to hear. No romance or adventure or mystery.

The guy didn’t call back and say, “Forget about Jill, let’s meet for dinner.”

He didn't call back and say, "Actually, I'm from another galaxy and I want to create a new type of being with you. I promise you'll really enjoy it."

He didn't call back and say that he would love to make something happen between us, but he was very busy because he was a rock star, a spy, a pirate, or a guy about to go on a cross country journey to find out some great truth.

He was just a nice guy and he was married and he even thanked me for helping his grandmother.

He didn't call back.

End of story.

After Carlos the Continuity Expert Quit the Movie and Headed to Costa Rica

He said it had to do with birds. They had names, beautiful names, and he'd call them out like he was reciting prayer: *scarlet-thighed dacnis*, *chestnut-headed oropendola*. The women on the set found it erotic, the way he said these names, but one day he was saying *thrush-like schiffornis* and then he was gone. He left a message on the director's answering machine. She showed up for the filming of the diner scene for *Emilio's Girls* and scowled a lot and drank enough coffee that her hands shook. Someone gave her a muscle relaxer, which helped.

Scenes were shot. Again. Again. Days of shooting. Not great shots. The actors said it was the moon, the stars, the time of year, the ghosts from *Scooby-Doo*.

Without Carlos things happened.

Ivy, who played the diner owner, wore a pale pink lipstick and then it was a darker mauve. One day she had a long red welt running up her arm. When asked, she would say it was from a cat. Ivy would not say that it was her husband, come to visit during the filming, and she would not say that it was a fight and that she had scratched herself along a wall after he pushed her. She was in love and that wouldn't do at all.

In earlier shots, Vera, the waitress, had a pencil in hand and one tucked behind her ear. Later, the pencil behind the ear was missing; it had fallen somewhere, along with crumbs from a blueberry muffin she ate during a break even though she was on a low carb diet.

When Vera asked, "What can I get you?" Emilio sipped from his water glass. In some shots, he was empty handed when he said the line "But there is only you" to Yvette, the woman sitting across from him. In some shots the water glass was full. In some it was half empty. Emilio complained that he thought the water tasted metallic, that someone was trying to poison him, though the food service folks said the water was bottled.

Julia, the director, who also wrote and starred in the film, looked on the verge of weepy. She did not have a huge budget. She had vision and drive but not enough backing, she said to the hair stylist.

Billy, the hair stylist, was young and handsome and in love with Emilio. He wanted to do a good job, but

he disliked Yvette, who was playing the new girlfriend. People assumed that off the set, Yvette was having an affair with Emilio—the way she fawned, the way she sat with her knee touching his even though the script did not direct her to. If asked, Billy would say it was not intentional—the awkward switch of the part in Yvette’s hair—right side on Tuesday, left on Wednesday, but people would still wonder.

Frank, Billy’s lover, was the wardrobe coordinator, and he didn’t like the way Billy looked at Emilio. He knew a crush when he saw one, and he was so busy complaining about it to Vera between takes, that he overlooked certain details. Emilio’s shirt was unbuttoned two buttons in some scenes, three in others. There were sunglasses tucked in his shirt pocket. Sometimes.

There were other issues too.

The clock wasn’t reset and time didn’t match so that when Julia entered the diner, strode over to Emilio and Yvette and said, “You left home six weeks ago and here you are?” it was 10:37 on the clock on the wall and it was 4:20 when she strode out after slapping Emilio with her purse. Too long to be in the diner, even if the peach cobbler was the best in town.

There was mustard on the table and then there wasn’t. The flowers by the diner door were blooming on Tuesday and drooping by late Wednesday afternoon.

Things happened. Continuity was lost. Each take did not match the previous one. The actors had anxiety attacks, the director had a migraine, the cameraman’s teenage daughter was in drug rehab.

A countertop with three dishes, a countertop swept clean. Details some moviegoers would later catch. They

would chuckle and feel smart and post comments on websites.

What they wouldn't pinpoint or mention, because they did not know, was this: the human heart could not be held to continuity. It did what it wanted.

Julia had a postcard from Carlos hidden in a dresser drawer. It was addressed to the cast and crew of *Emilio's Girls*. On the front was a rainforest scene. His note on the back said many things and mentioned the sighting of a *rufous motmot*. Julia read his cramped writing almost daily. She fanned her tears with the postcard until it warped and crinkled. No matter.

She knew the words by heart. They never changed.