THE NEWS & OBSERVER D+

Sunday Journal

SUNDAY, APRIL 8, 2007

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Each week, Sunday Reader features an original work of short fiction or poetry by a Southern writer.

The Sting

BY KATIE ROSE GUEST

I'm at Joe Peebles' wedding reception and I have a jellyfish welt crossing my rear end like a peppermint stripe. I'm not wearing any pantyhose under my blue Shelli Segal dress or any panties either. Even the loose fabric of the dress brushing against my legs makes me want to hiss. Joe Peebles looks so handsome in his tuxedo, so tall. He holds a glass of champagne, surveying his reception like a prince. But I know that his legs are striped up and down with welts just like the ones on me.

KATIE ROSE GUEST was born in Boston in 1976. She moved to Greensboro when she was a year old. Her father, Dr. Chris Guest, is a family doctor in Greensboro, and her mother, Barbara Guest, is a medical practice manager. Guest earned her undergraduate degree from Duke, her law degree from UNC-CH, and her M.A. in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. She is currently finishing her Ph.D. in English at UNC-Greensboro. Her fiction and poetry have been published in several journals, including California Quarterly, Flashquake, Ellipsis and Evansville Review.

The ballroom overlooks a long, sandy beach. It's dark outside now and the moon and stars glow on the water. Just like they did last night. All of our childhood friends came down to the coast for Joe Peebles' wedding. This is a big reunion, like senior prom six years after — guys in their tuxes, girls in their shiny dresses. I'm stuck at the edge of the dance floor because it hurts too much to move.

Joe Peebles and I have been friends since we were 4. His family lived across the street — the three Peebles boys and their mom and dad. Joe Peebles was born two days before me in December. When we were kids, we commiserated about the crappiness of December birthdays, how all the other kids got more stuff than we did. It's hard to believe Joe Peebles is getting married, that we're finished with college and working now.

Although his stings are bigger, Joe Peebles isn't hurting as badly as I am. My own father, who has been Joe Peebles' doctor since we were little kids, took Joe Peebles down to the resort's kitchen right after the wedding ceremony and treated his legs with vinegar to ease the pain. Then my father put cortisone lotion on the welts and gave Joe Peebles prescription anti-inflammatories. My father always travels with a medicine kit, especially when we travel with the Peebles family, because one of those boys always gets hurt.

I know how my father treated the stings because I asked Joe Peebles. While we whispered in the corner, partially hidden behind a ficus plant, I could smell the stink of vinegar on the wool of his tux. He didn't offer me one of those anti-inflammatories. Joe Peebles has never been the most thoughtful guy. I asked him what he was going to tell his bride about the stings. He said he'll tell her he went swimming with his brothers last night. They'll back him up.

I have to do something about these stings or I won't make it through this reception. I can't ask my father for help. He'll want to know why I was also stung by a jellyfish the night before Joe Peebles' wedding. Why I was in the ocean too. Why no one else was stung but me and Joe Peebles.

I can't complain to anyone at the reception about my jellyfish sting because they might figure out that last night Joe Peebles and I ran out into the ocean together naked and he held me in his arms like a baby. At first we laughed, saying how great it is to have old friends. Then he said to me, "You know, you could have anything you want." I don't remember what he said next because I was drunk. I watched the stars rock back and forth behind Joe Peebles' head with the rhythm of the waves. But I was sober enough to be aggravated that Joe Peebles was getting married in 12 hours to some girl he'd met at college.

Once, when we were 18, Joe Peebles and I had a big fight at Stacy Summers' party. We fought a lot when we were younger, actually. We started fighting after he kissed me at the eighth-grade dance, outside the boys' bathroom. That's when everything changed. After that, he started saying such mean and tactless things that I called him Jerk Peebles. The night of Stacy Summers' party, I was sitting on a couch talking to Jeremy, this guy from school I'd been wanting to go out with for a while. Joe Peebles sat in an armchair next to us, surrounded by girls. One sat on the back of the chair, one leaned against his knees, one sat on his lap. I figured he wasn't paying attention to me at all. A few moments later, he leaned over and said, *Danby, if you keep bending forward like that, Jeremy might realize you're easy*. Then Joe Peebles laughed, and took a sip of his beer. Tears struck the backs of my eyes. I stood. *Sometimes I really hate you, Joe*, I said. I turned to leave the party, picking up my coat from the back of the couch. *Wait!* Joe Peebles yelled over the music and the crowd. People got quiet. Joe Peebles liked to have an audience. I stopped and looked over my shoulder, refusing to turn all the way, refusing to give in. Joe's girls had scattered. *You can't hate me, Danby*, he said. *We're supposed to get married*. Some people laughed, but no one was surprised, not even me, because I knew it was true. Ever since we were kids, everyone just assumed it would happen one day. Me and Joe Peebles.

Yet there we were, me and Joe Peebles without a stitch on, him holding me like a baby at Carolina Beach at two o'clock in the morning. The night before his wedding. Stars swirled and sprayed like sparklers on the fourth of July. I looked at the hot stars above Joe Peebles' head, at the hot light in Joe's face. His face came closer, closer.

"My little Danby," he said. "You could have anything you want."

Something like fire brushed against the back of my leg, against my hip. Joe Peebles' eyes bulged out of his face. I flew from his arms and ran from the water.

"Ow, ow!" I screamed, fleeing the burn of the sting.

"Oh, crap! Oh man, oh crap!" Joe Peebles ran right behind me. We grabbed wet sand at the shoreline and rubbed it on our welts. We looked at each other with panic, not even seeing our naked bodies in the moonlight. We ran for the hotel pool. The cool, chlorinated water felt great for a moment, then the burns started throbbing. His stings were bigger because he'd been standing in the water, holding me. Mine were confined to my upper legs and rear. Joe's teeth flashed a white, bashful smile. He seemed grateful for the pain.