

Yalobusha Review

Volume 1 *Spring 1995*

Article 12

April 2021

Shelter

Jon Davies

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davies, Jon (2021) "Shelter," *Yalobusha Review*: Vol. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/vol1/iss1/12>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yalobusha Review by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Shelter

Winner: 1995 Ella Somerville Award for Fiction

I'll tell you why I'm here.

After fifteen holes of golf, my feet are falling apart, and I feel like strangling someone. So, instead, I drive to Berkowitz's Deli in Santa Monica to buy myself a sandwich and one of those Styrofoam macaroni salads. Frank, my best friend, is there manning the counter, and, as usual, he wants to talk. He's the manager. I've known Frank since he and I did high school together back in the seventies. He got the job after graduating and hasn't quit. He'll probably inherit the lousy place from Berkowitz, he's been there so long. Berkowitz, the owner, must be about eighty and ready to keel over the way he stumbles in every other week or so, all wheezy and smelly. Hospital smelly, if you know what I mean.

Myself, well, I'm not exactly in the talking mode, having dropped about two hundred dollars on some golf game I didn't want to be at. Work thing, you know. Impress the boss and all. Only, of course, I was a fool. Shooting thirty-five over par, losing my golf clubs from the back of the cart, dropping a couple shots in the lake, and then, insisting on that stupid bet. The last hole, though, that was the worst. I was on the green, five feet from the hole, when the cart started rolling backward into the swamp. That really got them going. "Charlie," they were saying, "you golf as well as you invest." That sort of stuff. I went off then, started cursing and swinging the club around, and, to tell the truth, I don't know if I'll have a job on Monday or what. Seems like you can't ever please a bunch of guys like that, though, the kind of guys who eat bagels for breakfast. Makes you wonder why you leave the house.

But I can't stand going home, either. I mean, my wife's probably waiting with a gun or something, if she hasn't burned the place down. We've been fighting a lot lately. So it's not like you could make my marriage any worse. I think she's going to insist I take the kid, our fourteen-year-old son, Michael, the one we have to bail out of jail about twice a month. No joke. I know the bailiffs' names, serial numbers, and work schedules by heart. The officers greet me by name. Last week, they found my son selling neighborhood cats to a Vietnamese restaurant. The school psychologist says he's seeking parental affection. I don't know, I think Michael's problem is he gets caught.

So I walk in, take my usual seat at the counter. The place is sticky and stinking of grease. Without even asking, Frank starts slapping together my usual ham and cheese and talking about his back problems.

"I don't want to hear about your stupid back," I tell him. "Feed me, and

I'll get out."

But Frank, Frank's the type of guy that's got to make you talk. I hate talking. Really, I do. It's just, sometimes, when I'm with someone I don't know well, I feel like I have to.

So, he asks, "How'd the game go?"

"What game?" I ask him, hoping he'll shut up.

"The golf game," he says, splattering up the ham real fine on the cutting board. "You get in all eighteen holes or what?"

"Yeah," I tell him. "Eighteen holes, twice. Three under par the first time, and two over par the second." Frank thinks I'm a golf genius. "You oughta join us sometime," I tell him.

"Na," he says, waving his left arm at me and staring at the ground. "I ain't no good. Haven't played golf since high school, since that time we snuck onto the course to steal those balls for the principal's closet."

"I'd teach you," I offer. But it won't do any good. Frank won't go farther than three blocks from the deli.

"I can't afford it," he tells me. "I'd have to work."

"You need a new job, Frank," I say to him. "Why don't you ask Berkowitz for a raise?"

"I can't," he tells me.

"Why not?" I ask.

"I can't," he says, his voice getting all whiny, that little kid whine, if you know what I mean, real irritating and stupid, only Frank's voice is more the former than the latter. Lucky for him. Talking about that sort of thing, though, gets Frank to back off. I mean, he hates talking jobs. I think he resents making five dollars an hour after nearly two decades of employment. Time to clear out, I keep telling him, this job's for teenagers and dweebs. He won't listen, though. He changes fry vats or chops up lettuce. Right then, he's sharpening the knife on some miniature whetstone he's got next to the chopping board. He's sharpening the knife to spread mustard. You can tell he's really serious about work.

"Listen," he says, sort of creeping back to me, and, for a moment, I think he's actually considering demanding a raise. "You gotta do me a favor," he says. His voice is real low and sincere, like he's embarrassed or guilty, like he's scared Berkowitz is going to hear he's willing to quit.

"What?" I ask him, real loud. I figure, if I get him fired one of these days, I'll be doing him a favor.

"You got to introduce me to someone," he says. He wipes his hands all over his dirty apron, like that's going to do them some good.

"Who?" I ask.

"A girl," he says, almost snickering and then glancing at the empty tables.

"What girl would I know that would want to meet you?" I say, smiling. I'll rib him about this one for months.

He looks at the floor and says, "Larry's daughter."

Larry's one of the investors I work with, or worked with until today. Yes, that's right, stocks and bonds. I'm a broker. I bet a lot of your guys claim that, but I am. Anyway, Larry's a jerk. He's got more mouth than brains. In fact, he's all mouth. He's always talking up his clients, but if you want to meet them, he'll produce some lousy excuse, like they're in Tibet for three years studying Buddhism or something. You can always tell when Larry's lying like that, though, because he crosses his legs. I'm serious. Larry will be taking some guy for a real humdinger of an investment, I mean, he'll be trying to sell him stock in a combination chicken restaurant/laundry mat or something, and he'll be saying stuff like, "Yeah, yeah, it's a hot one, guys are just fighting to get in on it. A CEO from Hong Kong Seafood was trying to buy us out last week," and all, and he'll cross his legs, really. Even standing up. It's a gas.

Anyway, he's picky about his daughter and who she dates, and if I were him, I would be too. His daughter's a real looker. She's only a senior in high school, but she's got about the best legs I've seen since, well, until today. They're like lemon drops on ice. They're like butter on your palm. They're like, they're some kind of legs. For a kid, that is.

To tell the truth, Frank wouldn't have met her or Larry if I hadn't brought them in that one night back in January. Don't know why I did either, because Larry won't quit talking about the kind of crummy establishments I frequent. But it was raining that night, and we needed someplace to keep dry, and Berkowitz's happened to be near, and, I don't know, momentary lapse of consciousness or something, I recommended we go in there. I'd forgotten about Frank, and when he started talking like he knew me, I froze, because, well, Larry's the type of guy that doesn't go within five feet of someone who makes less than five figures. We were coming back from some silly "art film" Larry's daughter'd been keen on from her private school friends, when the rain started. The wipers on the car I had at the time needed replacing, and I couldn't see straight to drive. So we had to wait for it to clear. I never figured that Frank would get infatuated like this. "She's eighteen," I remind him. "You're thirty-nine."

"I got to get married," he tells me. "These young types, they're the easiest to get." Then, of course, Frank just keeps going, and my sandwich isn't anywhere near being finished, and I'm sick of waiting. So I pick up a menu, the same lousy plastic piece with the prices taped over that's been there about twenty years. I've got it memorized, but I read it anyway. It seems to me that, old as Berkowitz is, he

should have been able to think up at least one new thing by now. But I guess you get that way, comfortable with what you've got: eight tables and a deli, a menu with a couple hamburgers and fries. I guess Frank's comfortable too. I guess that's why people go there, because of that, because it's the one thing that doesn't change.

Anyway, Frank keeps going on about girls, but finally works back to talking about his spine and how, if he could get a girl that could walk on his back and straighten him out, he'd have it made. The girl would have to have nice feet, kind of short and chubby, and real soft like hands, so they'd make him sleepy as she walked on him. I'm thinking, if Frank got a date, he'd be somewhere. And if she liked talking about backs, they'd get hitched that night.

So I'm kind of staring at the menu as Frank's fixing up the sandwich and jabbering on, when this girl walks in. She couldn't have been older than, say, eighteen or nineteen. I notice her enter because, the way the door's set up, it's real heavy, almost falling off its hinges, so that, whenever someone opens it, it makes this loud metal noise like in an old car engine. I look up. She's in thongs and has these chubby legs, real tan, like fried chicken skin. She's wearing black short overalls, but without a bra or a shirt or anything, so that her breasts keep plopping out the sides in rhythm as she walks. Suddenly, I'm feeling like I want a cigarette, but I don't have one. So I play around with the menu, but finally I lay it down and put my left fist in my right hand and feel the fingers and the ring.

The girl, meanwhile, steps almost right up to me, or to the counter anyway, and takes a seat. "Give me two cheese and mustard sandwiches," she says lazily to Frank, not even glancing at me.

"What kind of meat?" he asks, not yet turning around. She's got this black baseball cap on, and a pony tail sticking out the back like a feather. I feel weird, and I cross my legs and look out at the window, but I can't help staring at her boobs, which are right there, right beside me, like I could pick one up, like an egg in a grocery store.

"I don't eat meat," she says, all gruff. "It's criminal."

Well, that gets Frank's attention, because if there's one thing Frank hates, it's vegetarians. He turns around quick, then, with the knife in his hand, but when he sees the girl, his arms go limp, and he straightens up and smiles at her.

I don't know what gets into me, but right then, I'm feeling like I want something different. So I tell Frank, "I think I'll skip the ham on my sandwich today."

He stares me down, and then grabs the plate and hands me my sandwich. "Too late," he says. "You don't want the meat, take it out yourself."

So I lift the top part of the bread and disengage the red stuff in the middle and put the stuff on a napkin beside my dish. Meanwhile, Frank's watching this girl

as he spreads out more bread, and saying stuff like, "Ain't seen you in here before. Where you from?"

"What's it to you?" she glares, and plants her feet on the metal foot rest next to the counter. She's got her thongs off, and her toes curl around the pole. The nails are red and chipped, like tiny bird tongues. But what I notice most is her feet, how they're flat, not just flat like a slab of beef or something, but wide and soft, kind of flaring out at the toes. I watch them as I fold up my ham in the napkin and, then, wipe off my fingers.

Meanwhile, Frank, who's missing all this toe stuff, starts chopping up the cheese, but with this real intensity, like he's cooking for some rich guy.

I hand Frank my meat, and he chucks it on the sandwich board behind him. "I bet you're one of those Hollywood girls," I say to the kid, because that's what she is. Just a kid.

"I'm from Bel Air," she huffs, as her feet climb the wall of the counter. I can see her legs. They're like honey and peaches. Really. You think I'm only saying that, but I mean it.

So she says, "I came to the beach to go shopping."

"You came to the beach to go shopping," I repeat.

"Yeah," she says, darting her eyes at me and nudging the hair above her right ear with her fingers.

"You live with your parents then?" Frank butts in.

"So what?" she says.

"They must be pretty rich," he continues. By now he's got the mustard on the bread, and he's laying out the cheese.

"Yeah, they own a lousy mansion," she says, returning her feet to the pole.

Frank hands her the sandwich, and we both watch as she bites into it. We don't say anything. We just watch her hands lift the bread, and her teeth rip it apart. I'm not even sure she notices us because she keeps eating. I can see the crevice underneath the sides of her breasts which sort of hang out the sides of her overalls as she lifts the sandwich. Frank's watching that too. But she doesn't look at us, only at her plate or out the windows to the street.

There isn't much out there. Berkowitz's is on a side street with a couple generic law offices, the kind with the plate glass window doors with the lawyer's name inscribed into them, all exclusive and permanent looking. It's one of those streets you drive on everyday in your car but never stop to look at. It's like, if you ever got out and walked around, you'd discover people work and live there, that there's parking meters along the sidewalk, and all the buildings are cubes of stucco and cement. It's one of those streets that never change. There are about six antique dealers on it and a black and white photography studio and the lawyers' of

fices. You wouldn't think the beach is three blocks away.

"Ain't you guys got anything better to do?" the girl finally peeps, putting down her bread.

"Like what?" Frank says.

"Like clean your fingernails," she says.

Frank examines his fingers, mists them over with his breath, and then wipes them on his apron. He looks out the window after that, and then turns and starts clearing his sandwich board. Me, I sit there and watch her, hands clasped together in my lap.

"I bet he's been here since high school," she says to me, sort of chuckling. "I bet this is the only job he's ever had."

Frank stops cleaning, bends over to pick up some bucket, and strides into the back room. I fold my arms, stick my hands under my armpits, and smile at her, a real cool smile, like how I used to smile before I got married. "Sure," I say. It's a suave sure, not like she's right or anything, or wrong, just kind of agreeing with her.

I don't know where she gets it, but she says, "You're married, aren't you?"

"Why would you say that?" I reply.

"You keep hiding your hands," she says. "Married men hide their hands when they're around a pretty girl like me."

"You think you're pretty?" I ask her.

"Prettier than you'll ever be," she says. She picks up her sandwich and takes another bite. Her feet come together, one over the other on the bar.

"I'm divorced," I tell her, which is basically true. I mean, my wife and I are sort of separated. I've been sleeping on the couch while I look for another place, which is why my wife's mad at me, because it's been a month or two since we decided. It's just, I don't know, finding an apartment and moving is a pain. And if she sticks me with Mike, I'll kill one of them, or both.

"I bet you married the kind of woman that came after you," she says. "I bet you didn't go after her. I bet she came after you."

"Sure," I say. "Women are always after me." Truth is, I met my wife at a rock concert at a little club in Hollywood. She was the lead backup singer, and she had a voice as bubbly as soda pop, sharp and high and staccato, and when she wasn't singing, she was holding a tambourine and slapping it against her other palm. She would hold the thing above her head whenever she hit it, and her t-shirt—she had on a real short one that barely came down to her jeans—would bob up to just under her breasts, exposing her white stomach and her belly button. I didn't much watch anyone else in the band, and, pretty soon, she was watching me. I'd have introduced myself after their set was done, if she hadn't gotten to it first. She ordered the drinks, asked my name, and we left together that night. Three

weeks later, she'd quit the band, and we were married. If you want my opinion, it was too fast. My wife says different. She says I needed a woman. I let her think what she wants.

Frank struts back in about then. He's wearing a new apron, light blue and clean. His hair is wet and combed back. I almost laugh.

"What you smirking at?" Frank asks, pulling out a couple pies from underneath the counter behind him. From the back, I can see he's got on new jeans, but that the shirt is the same he always wears because of the yellow stain beneath the collar. He puts the pies on the counter and begins slivering them. "Anyone want pie?" he asks. "I got cherry and apple."

"I bet neither of you guys have the guts to ask me out," the girl says, wrapping her legs around each other like the strands of a rope.

"I'd love to ask you out," Frank says. "But you're too young."

"I've been with lots of forty-year-olds," she says, pointing to the cherry pie.

"I ain't forty," Frank stews, putting down his knife and licking his pie-besmirched fingers before wiping them on his apron. "I'm thirty-three." I don't say anything, of course.

"Anything over twenty's the same to me," she says, holding out her empty plate. Frank hands over a piece of cherry, and she continues, "You still won't ask me out."

Frank chops out a piece for me and hands it over. It's apple, which he knows I hate, but I take a bite anyway. "You got a boyfriend?" Frank asks her.

"Yeah," she says, sort of coolly. "But it doesn't matter."

"What's he like?" Frank asks.

"He's terrible," she says. Cherry covers her lips, and she wipes them with her napkin. I cross my legs the other way and look at my foot and her feet, resting on the same pole.

"How long you been with him?" Frank asks. That's the thing with Frank, once he starts the questions, he can't stop.

"Three days," she says.

"You had a lot of boyfriends?" Frank asks. He's cut himself a piece of pie by then, but he isn't touching it. He just stands, staring at this girl as she talks. I'd never seen a girl look back at a guy that did that till then. I'm thinking, if she likes backs, Frank's got it made.

"I've had at least forty guys," she says and looks my way and down to my food. I gesture with my fork to see if she wants a bite of my pie, but she turns and stares out the window and sighs. Her breasts give a heave, and her pony tail bobs up, then down. I twist my stool around to face her, only she's turned so that I face

her side. “They’re all the same,” she continues. “All they want is sex. They make some pretense at a relationship, but I know. It all works out the same.”

That wrangles me. I mean, I hate it when women generalize like that. That’s what my wife does. She looks at a guy in her office—she works at an accounting firm of all places—and assumes all guys are like that. Some V.P. has an affair, and she gets this crazy idea I’m unfaithful. I don’t say I hadn’t thought of it once or twice, but just to bug her, just to bug her, mind you. Nothing ever serious, no real lust or anything. To tell the truth, I’m kind of shy. I don’t usually do this sort of thing.

So I ask the girl, “How would you know?” What I want to do, of course, is grab her by the arms and give her a good whack or two, or hook her around the neck, but, instead, I ask her that question.

She glares at me. It’s a mean glare, but do you think I care? I’d do it again, if I could. I mean, to be frank, I like it when this girl glares at me. Her nose curls up, and her eyes narrow, and it makes her look, I don’t know, dangerous or something.

“I was going to get married once,” she says. I can see her teeth. They are like carefully placed pieces of china, each one a perfect match. Rich girls.

“Sure,” I say.

“Dumped the dude,” she says, standing up. “He was a dud. Too stuffy.” Her hands reach up to tuck each side of the breasts more completely into her overalls. They are small hands. Childlike hands. I want to hold them, but I clutch my arms. She steps forward, and her breath pushes against my cheek. For a moment, I think she’s going to kiss me. Or Frank. Instead, she slips her feet into the thongs and turns around. She looks like a stupid advertisement. Her pony tail sways from side to side, a piece of limp celery, as she starts to walk around the place, not anywhere specifically, just around. And then, she walks out the door into the street. She doesn’t even turn around to look at us. Frank and I watch her disappear, and, then, we just stare out the window like there’s nothing but glass, like the earth’s invisible. It must be two or three minutes before we say anything.

The world could be a wonderful place, I’m thinking, as I sit there. We could stay silent like that and not think a single thing. We could sit there, Frank and I, perfectly still, and just watch, and there wouldn’t be any golf games or rain or Berkowitzs or Larrys or Michaels or wives or girls or any of that stuff to bother us.

Frank, of course, is the first to speak. “You want that ham now?” he asks me.

“Yeah,” I say. He hands it to me, and I slide it back into the bread and begin to eat.

That’s pretty much how it happens.