

# **The Alchemist Review**

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## MEMORIES OF FLO

Face powder applied heavily to disguise her wrinkles, served only to intensify them as the powder creviced between the folds of loose skin. The eyebrows have been shaved, and across the patches of shiny skin specked with stubble, were harsh, black, pencilled lines. The lines which long before might have enhanced vibrant green eyes, now merely enhanced a clownish taint. Bright red lipstick extended well above the natural bow of the upper lip, cheeks blotched with red rouge gave neither hint nor promise of youth. The bleached hair had lost its lustre, and had now the appearance of tufts of broken hair on a discarded doll. The sequined dress was too tight across the wide hips and bulging abdomen; the delicate high-heeled sandals were stretched protestingly around swollen feet.

Because her life, her potency, her essence, had rested in youth and sexuality, she had not escorted time; she had tarried and supposed that time had gone on, alone. And while other women sought to hide in the flattering glow of the candle, she stood, defiantly, in blazing light. She thrust out her matronly breasts as though they were yet voluptuous. When she walked, she swayed her buttocks as though she were yet seductive. She flirted with men as though she were yet, the embodiment of all that is erotic.

I was acquainted with Flo for only a short time, and that was many years ago. I haven't seen her since, but I've gotten to know her over the years. I believe I've gotten to know her well during these past twenty years.

She owned a Chinese Restaurant on Westderby Road in Liverpool when I met her. She'd chosen an excellent location: the Grafton and the Locarno Ballrooms across the road; a pub on every corner, and a bus stop three doors down. I looked older than fifteen, and she believed me when I told her that I was eighteen and in need of money because I was entering university in the autumn. She gave me a job waiting tables on Fridays and Saturdays for five shillings a night, and she became so enthusiastic about my education, that I was ashamed at having lied to her.

The restaurant had some banal name such as "The Oriental Palace." The outer appearance gave little credence to the name; the inner appearance gave even less. The high ceiling, harsh lighting, and the healthy population of flies denied even the suggestion of romantic atmosphere. The red flock wallpaper looked old and tired, and the white plastic table-cloths had yellowed and ripped. But the people who poured in there from the dance halls or the pubs came only to satisfy their ravenous appetites with food that was cheap and plentiful and served with as much bread and butter as they could eat.

An elderly Chinese man and his son, the only authentic oriental elements

of the place, did the cooking. Neither of them spoke much English, and when any of us tried to make conversation with them, they would listen intently, and then nod their heads and laugh loudly by way of reply. Flo never interfered with the cooking; she was more concerned that the supply of bread smeared with butter never ran short, and that there were plenty of small, white plates to serve it on.

When she wasn't in the kitchen buttering bread, she went around all of the tables; welcoming, chatting, laughing and flirting. She glided through that restaurant as though there were celebrities seated at every table. She could always make a person feel special, and everybody adored her for that.

It was later that I realized that she didn't have any close friends, and she never mentioned having any family. She just had him. I think his name was Jack, and I assumed that he'd been her boyfriend for some time. He was handsome enough. Dark wavy hair, accurate features complimented by a pencil thin moustache. He always wore crisp shirts, well tailored, well pressed suits, and highly polished, unscuffed shoes. He was very quiet — not shy — just quiet. He was pleasant enough, but although I wanted to like him because he was Flo's boyfriend, I never really got beyond feeling indifferent toward him. He took care of the cash drawer which was kept in the kitchen, and during quiet periods, he counted the money. That's how I always remember him — counting money.

After I'd worked at the "Palace" for a few weeks, Flo told me that I could make some extra money by cleaning her flat for her. I went there the following Sunday morning at five past eleven, which I thought had allowed plenty of time for Flo to sleep-in. Her flat turned out to be part of a large, very old house which had seen far grander days. She was wearing a pink chenille robe when she opened the door, and I remember that she looked very old to me that morning. Her hair hadn't been combed, and the mascara she'd put on the night before, was now smudged beneath her eyes. There was just one room crammed with large, heavy furniture. There wasn't any kitchen, Flo said that she always ate out, just a small burner on which she boiled water for tea. There was a fireplace, and after she'd put coal on the fire and poked it up, the place seemed more cosy.

As I dusted the furniture, she pattered around after me, a cup of tea in one hand, a cigarette in the other, talking constantly. When I'd finished, I asked her what I should clean next, and she told me that I'd done enough cleaning for one day, and she sat me down with a cup of tea and we talked for a long time. She paid me four shillings for dusting her furniture; it was the easiest money I ever made.

How I envied her in those days. An independent woman. Her own business, her own flat, a handsome boyfriend and popular with so many

people. To me, she had everything, and she was enjoying life to the full. Except — I remember that one night I was in the kitchen waiting for my order, and I happened to turn and look at her. She was over at the table where she buttered the bread. She was quite motionless, staring straight ahead, and her face was contorted with fear. I spoke to her, "Are you all right Flo?" Slowly, she turned her face toward me. I'd never seen anyone look so helpless — she looked like some terrified animal caught in a trap. And then, in an instant, she was chatting, and laughing, and she left the kitchen and toured the tables making everybody seated at them feel as special as she always did.

There's never one grand revelation in understanding another person. It's a series of discovery, a continuing realization that grows so slowly we are hardly aware of it. I can't remember the exact moment that the envy turned to pity. I can't remember which day it was that I thought of her and instead of smiling, I wept.

— Lynne Weller

## OUR JOAN

I only remember our Joan ever goin' out with three fellers, and she up and married the third one. Not like me. I went out with more fellers than I've had hot dinners, but then, on the other hand, a hot dinner might have had more personality than some of the fellers I met. 'Course, I've always been one of them that thinks experience is everything; always been a bit of a gypsy, different jobs, different places, different fellers. That's the way I like it, but now, our Joan, she was just the opposite. It's not like me to remember people real well, especially their names. Hell, I've been to bed with fellers that I wouldn't know now if I fell over them, but I do remember all of our Joan's boyfriends.

The first one was Ron. Our Joan was about sixteen then, which would make me eight, and he might have been about eighteen. He was kind of skinny, so was our Joan though come to think of it, but he was a nice looking kid. She never shut up about him. He was a lorry driver, and he had an ulcer because he used to drive the lorry right after he'd eaten his dinner, that's what she told me. I remember that because ever since, I sit real still for like twenty minutes after I eat. I don't want no ulcer. Anyway, ulcer or not, she was crazy about him. He used to come to our house on Saturday nights when me mum and dad went out on the ale, and our Joan had to stay home with me. I never saw much of Ron because she'd bribe me with sweets and sarsaparilla to stay up in our room, and seeing that I was a fat little kid, and Saturday was the day I went to the library, I was quite content to stay upstairs with me liquorice allsorts, pop and a "Secret Five" adventure book. But when Ron was going home, I used to creep to the top of the stairs and sit there watching our Joan and him down in the lobby kissin'. By god, them two'd clutch on to each other like they'd drown if they let go, and you know, he used to do something that none of the fellers I've met since ever did. When he was kissin' her, he used to dip her. Just like old Rudolph Valentino did in them silent pictures; he used to dip her for Christ's sake. I may have only been eight, but I was very impressed by that, and I knew, even at that tender age, that our Joan wasn't going to meet too many lorry drivers who'd dip her.

I can't for the life of me remember why she stopped going out with him. My dad used to get on her all the time about her being too young to be courtin'. Maybe that had something to do with it, but hell, the old man nagged all of us no matter what we did so I don't think she would have given up gettin' dipped just to shut father up. I think that she and Ron just had a fallin' out, but anyway, her eyes were red for a while, and she moped around the house, and my liquorice allsorts and sarsaparilla were just memories.

Me mother worked at the ice-skating rink then, and she talked our Joan into going there and learnin' to skate. After a couple of weeks, Joan got herself a pair of dazzlin' white ice-boots and a black skating skirt, which me

father said didn't even cover her arse. She started going skating three times a week, and her eyes weren't red anymore except for when she had a sty. She was always gettin' stys because, accordin' to me mother, she let herself get constipated. Then one night when we were eatin' our dinner, our Joan announced that she was going out with some feller Friday of that week.

"Who's that?" me mother asked her.

"Malcolm Thompson," said our Joan, real proud like.

Both of me big brothers stopped shoveling potatoes in their mouths and stared at her.

"Malcolm Thompson?" our Kenny asked her. "The little feller with the sandy, wavy hair, the one you were skating around with on Monday night?"

"That's him," said Joan, reaching for the bread and butter.

"He's a bloody queer," said our Kenny.

"Watch your language," said me mother.

"Have you seen him?" Kenny yelled at me mother. "He walks with a goddamned wiggle."

Our Joan was glaring at him, but she couldn't say anything because her bottom lip was quivering too much.

"Is he comin' here for you?" I asked her with my fingers and toes crossed. I wanted to see that wiggle. Our Kenny may have had pimples and sweaty feet, but by god, he didn't lie. Joan nodded, Kenny and Harry grinned at each other, me mother's face twitched on the left side like it always did when she was nervous, me dad kept on reading the newspaper, and I prayed that Friday would hurry up and come.

Friday came — and so did Malcolm. Me mother brought him in the living room, and the old man just looked up from his newspaper and kind of grunted. I was sitting at the table wishing that we had a big living room because Malcolm had sat down before I'd had a chance to get a good look at his walk. As soon as he opened his mouth, I knew he was a posh one.

"I've just flown in from London to keep my date with Joan," he told father, and he said it just the way the queen'd say it.

Without even lowering his paper, the old man said, "Your bloody arms

must be tired mate.” Me mother glared at father’s newspaper, then she glared at me ‘cos I was gigglin’, and then she looked up, toward the ceiling because there were loud shrieks of laughter comin’ from me brothers’ bedroom up above. I ran upstairs to see what the commotion was. Our Kenny was walkin’ round the room with one hand on his hip, and his bum swaying just like Jayne Mansfield, and our Harry was rollin’ about on the bed holding his middle and laughin’ so hard he was crying. I had to laugh too; our Ken did look funny.

“You’d better shut up,” I warned them, “our Joan’ll get mad at you.”

Our Joan should be glad I’m stayin’ up ‘ere,” Kenny said, still wigglin’ “If I went downstairs right now, Malcom’d want to take me out instead of her.” That sent all of us into fresh shrieks of laughin’. I don’t remember if I really understood what he meant, or if I just laughed at them two laughin’, but I do know that we had a bloody good time.

Well, anyway, I don’t think she went out with Malcolm more than three times, and then, when she was still only eighteen, she started going out with Charlie. He was a lot older than she was, by about twelve years, and the old man really gave her a hard time about that. Charlie wasn’t much to look at, and if he had any personality or sense of humour, I never did see evidence of it. But Charlie’s dad had a record shop, and when Joan started going out with him, we had one record player and one record, and then, after the fourth or fifth date, she came home with a square box that turned out to have every record in the top twenty in it. Me and me brothers told her that she should keep on going out with Charlie.

“I’m going to return all of those records and all of these other presents he bought,” she said, real prissy like, “I don’t know him well enough to be taking gifts from him.”

“Well, just give him back that necklace he gave you,” our Kenny said, “but keep the records.” More hit records arrived, and later there were E.P.’s and even L.P.’s, and then she married him, and we had to start buying our records at Lewis’s.

She got three terrific kids out of that marriage; they’re all grown now, all doing well in college. And when you’ve said that, you’ve just about said it all as far as her marriage is concerned. She’ll be forty-five now, and although I know how important her kids are to her, she hasn’t had much of a life, not really. She’s a good hearted soul as well, she deserved to be happier than she has been.

It’s funny that when you’re sitting at the top of the stairs watching your sister get dipped, or when you’re laughin’ at your brother making fun of her feller,

you have no idea of the future, of the completed picture.  
I suppose that's just as well though.

— Lynne Weller

## IMAGES OF GRANDMA

Grandma  
Dad's mother  
was  
the only grandparent  
still living  
by the time that I was born

she always made  
such good sugar cookies  
cut in animal shapes  
and sprinkled all red  
and yellow and blue  
and green

she liked visits  
from her grandchildren  
the cookies were for us  
she wore  
long dresses —  
and solid gold rings  
that hung from her ears  
they must have been very heavy  
I could see through the holes in her lobes  
I was fascinated

she spoke German —  
and English with a dialect  
her house  
smelled like fresh bread  
hot from the oven

I could see myself  
in her kitchen linoleum

— Betty Aderman Kopatz