

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

Diving for Dollars

BY REBECCA LANNING

As Gilbert flops into bed, wrecking the comforter, Allison buries her head under her pillow. She can't take another night of Gilbert's coughing and snorting. He claims it's allergies, but it's not. He makes all those nasally noises just to annoy her. Crude as it is, snorting is Gilbert's primary form of communication.



REBECCA LANNING was born in Newport News, Va., in 1962. Her father, Tate, is a consulting civil engineer; her mother, Michael, is a homemaker. A graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill, Lanning earned a master of arts degree in English at N.C. State University, where she taught composition and fiction writing. A former magazine editor, she works as a freelance writer. Lanning has published short stories in Southern Magazine, Teen and Encore. She lives in Wilmington with her husband, Frank Godwin, and their sons, Will and Tate.

His primary form of entertainment is watching late-night reruns of "Love Connection." He flicks it on now, and as fuzzy light fills the room, he pokes Allison hard with his elbow. "Listen to this," he says, turning up the volume. Allison opens her eyes real slow.

A heavyset woman in a tight dress sits next to Chuck Woolery, recapping her date at a steakhouse in the Valley.

Allison turns on her bedside lamp, slips on reading glasses and reaches for a book; Gilbert turns his head toward Allison and coughs.

The truth is, Allison doesn't need those glasses. Her optometrist, Kyle VanSandt, said her astigmatism was so minor she could go either way, but Allison was delighted to get the prescription. She was delighted with the way Dr. VanSandt gazed into her eyes, so thoughtfully, through his own wire-rims. Reclining in the examining chair, Allison imagined what it would be like to be married to a doctor of optometry. A man with framed diplomas on his office wall. Surely, Kyle VanSandt didn't watch "Love Connection."

"Could you turn that thing down?" she says to Gilbert. She doesn't look up from her book, and Gilbert doesn't turn down the TV. Instead he raises his beefy arms, clasps his hands behind his head and unleashes a sloshy hack, as if a tadpole were lodged in his throat.

His business cards say, "Gilbert A. Swicegood, Underwater Salvage." Allison thinks it gives people the wrong idea. "It's not like you save people from drowning," she says.

What Gilbert does is drive a rusty van to golf courses all over the coastal Carolinas, where he scuba dives into pesticide-infested ponds, groping for golf balls in the murky water. He gets paid 10 cents a ball. Some days, he hits the jackpot and rakes in 2,000 balls. Other days, the ponds are empty, as if all the errant balls were devoured by some wayward gator.

This isn't the job Gilbert had when Allison met him two years ago. Back then, Gilbert was assistant scuba instructor at Aquatic Safaris. When he told her he wanted to be the next Jacques Cousteau, Allison imagined chucking her job at Prime Cut Salon. She'd accompany Gilbert on long voyages, making paella for the crew, cutting their hair when it grew shaggy and unmanageable. A few months after they were married, Aquatic Safaris went bankrupt.

For six weeks, Gilbert loafed around the apartment with the blinds closed, eating Cheetos dipped in mayonnaise. Eventually, someone called him about the golf ball job, and Allison talked him into it.

"Just quit when you find something better," she'd said. Ha!

Allison can't understand how the things she loved about Gilbert are the things she hates about him now. Like his dreams. She used to sit in the kitchen every morning drinking coffee and listening in rapt amazement as Gilbert recounted dreams from the night before. Once Gilbert dreamed he was being chased through the woods by Howard Cosell. Another night he was performing "Give Me Two Steps" in the White House rose garden. "Gilbert, you are wide open!" Allison would say, and he'd do a little rooster strut in his boxers. These days, if Gilbert tries to tell Allison about one of his dreams, she smiles tightly and looks away.

When she had a cancellation at work this afternoon, she sat down with a Diet Coke, put on her new glasses and jotted down everything

she hates about Gilbert on a legal pad. The first thing was *His handwriting*. Then, *His spelling*. Of course, she included *Snorting*. Then, *TV habits*, *Body odor*, *Cannot tie a tie*, *Initials (G.A.S.)*, *Crotch scratching*, *Fake Northern accent*, *Monobrow*, *Wardrobe of a 12-year-old* and *Mumbles when ordering fast food*. That was the first page. She'd almost filled the entire pad when her 3:30 showed up.

Now, lying in bed, Allison remembers her list. She'd stuffed it in her bag at work, and now she wonders if Gilbert might discover it. For a moment, she imagines him finding the list: his thick neck stiffening, his forehead shrinking in a mass of tangled lines, and then, in retaliation, a hack as loud as a sonic boom.

Actually, Allison realizes, Gilbert needs to see his flaws on paper. This could be the beginning of a marriage makeover. Maybe they could go on "Dr. Phil" and help millions of other husbands whose wives find them repulsive.

Just as Allison gets out of bed to plant the list where Gilbert would definitely find it, she notices his leg.

At first she thinks it's a prank, like the time he toured the movie studio in Wilmington. The makeup artist had picked him for a black eye demonstration, and he came home whimpering that he'd been in an accident.

Allison turns on the overhead light. The side of Gilbert's right shin is swollen the size of an orange and wrapped in gauze, through which Allison can see pus and streaks of dried blood. "What the hell happened?" she says.

"Gator got me," Gilbert says, eyes on the tube.

"Where?"

"Leg."

"I mean where were you?" Allison scrambles back onto the bed. On hands and knees now, she leans in for a closer look. She takes off her glasses so she can see better.

"Palmetto Plantation," says Gilbert. "That mother was hidin' in the seagrass waitin' to ambush me!"

"Well, whadya do?" She can't take her eyes off his leg.

"Grabbed him by his tail, that's what."

"You're lucky," Allison offers, running her finger around the wound. She tries to imagine her husband, this eater of Cheetos, wrestling an alligator. It seems so barbaric and yet so ... heroic. Dr. VanSandt would've stood there trembling in his tartan vest, and that gator would've cracked his Coke-bottle glasses and snapped him in two.

The funny thing was, Gilbert hadn't called her at work to tell her what happened. He hadn't hobbled around the apartment in exaggerated pain.

He'd just come home and taken care of himself like a grown man.

"Why didn't you say something earlier?" As Allison probes the bandage, Gilbert flinches.

"I figured it'd just make you more ticked off," he says.

Allison reaches for a pillow. "Keep it elevated," she tells him. Gently, she lifts Gilbert's injured leg with one hand, slips the pillow under it with another. Then she smooths the blankets around his leg as if she's sculpting a bowl or building a nest. "There," she says. "That's better." Scooping up the remote, she turns off the TV. She feels her husband's brow for fever. She brushes her pulsing lips against his ear, and with a voice full of hope and fury asks, "Where you reckon that gator is now?"

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