

Shakespeare in Hell by Amy Sterling

“Shakespeare in Hell” originally appeared in the online magazine *Elysian Fiction*. It is a 20,000 word novella, which I wrote “just to see if I could.” Over time, I learned that stories of this length were published much more often in the past than they are today. One story that I recently reread of this length was Joanna Russ’ “Souls.” From a reader, I learned that this story, with very little change, became part of a Tor Double — and these books were often novella-length works put together.

“Shakespeare in Hell,” similarly to “Mad for the Mints,” has many literary antecedents. The “Dark Lady,” I am sad to say — could have truly been the historical figure mentioned in the story, although the story imagined is, of course, entirely fictional. As to Bob Haldeman — even “flies” may sometimes have their day.

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Amy Sterling

She was dark, very oddly-dressed, with black-brown hair and eyes of the same shade. She visited Bob in his dreams.

“I’m Emilia,” she said, kneeling beside his bed. “Look at this.”

In her hand, she held a red and yellow striped top, the same kind young Bob Haldeman had growing up in the suburbs of Los Angeles. It was a crisp day outside, with the sky a bright, painful blue outlining the Santa Barbara Hills.

Bob would have sworn that he was asleep after two cans of Ensure and a heavy dose of pain medication, but it felt as though he was awake. He was used to visitors. Every day, they were calling and coming by. If Bob had lived his life by the newspapers, he would have thought that he had no friends, that he was one of the most hated men in America. Yet he also knew that his wife and his children loved him well. If that wasn’t living proof that nobody should ever believe what they read in the papers, Bob didn’t know what would be.

The woman put the top on the hardwood floor beside Bob’s bed, and grabbed the red wood knob that made it spin. Bob would have sworn that he’d had that exact top, back when he was just a kid, maybe five or six years old. Sometimes the medicine gave you crazy dreams. Or maybe it was the cancer. Or maybe just the act of dying. And Bob knew that he was doing that.

“Joanne wouldn’t appreciate a strange woman being in my bedroom,” Bob said, aware that, whatever this dream was, there was no real woman there.

Was there?

“Look,” the woman Emilia said. “Into the top.”

Bob laughed. He saw his face as a young man, spinning right there in the top. Then as a freckled, clean-cut teen, then as the boy in a clean blue and white striped T-shirt he had once been, so many years before.

“This is what they say,” he laughed. “Your life, flashing before your eyes.” After so long life, it didn’t seem as though it much mattered. Or at least, he wasn’t afraid. Not at all. Not any more.

The woman’s black eyes flashed in return. “Perhaps,” she said.

Bob watched the top.

“You know,” he said, sighing, watching the top spin, then begin to wobble. “It reminds me of something.

