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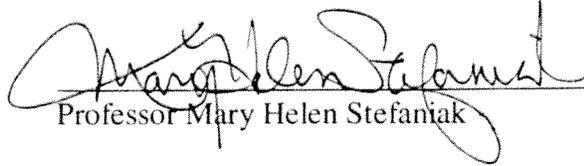
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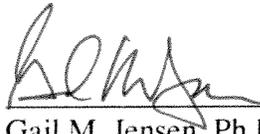
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THEOTOKOS AND OTHER STORIES ABOUT LOVE

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A THESIS

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Abstract

“Theotokos” and Other Stories About Love is a collection of short fiction. The first and titular story of the collection, “Theotokos,” describes an elderly Greek woman’s journey to convince any one of her five busy children to take her to the store. Next, “Lovie and Hate” captures one of the worst moments of young Danny’s life during his twelfth birthday party. “Love Story,” set in Story, Wyoming, portrays the importance of companionship and the insignificance of attraction between a couple decades into their marriage. The final story in the collection, “April Showers,” depicts the reaction of the victim of an obvious crime with a secondary storyline of a more subtle victim. The thesis concludes with an essay entitled “Theotokos and Other Stories About Love: The Writer’s Essay” which serves as a personal statement of artistry and a reflection on the entire collection.

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Theotokos

Today, I am going to get a job. I have wanted one since 1947. I am going to Demetrios's restaurant, and I will wait on his tables. He cooks with all my recipes, so I can serve the food to his customers. He even named his restaurant after me. "Yia Yia's." I know that there are many, many Yia-Yias. I also know that I've never had a job before, and that I'm not a smart woman, so I might not be very good at it. But I am his children's Yia-Yia, so it is named after me. And he uses *my* recipes, so I can serve my recipes at my restaurant.

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

"Evangelia?"

"Yes, Mom, it's Angie."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine, Mom. How are you?"

"Fine, fine. I went for a walk."

"Mom, it's twenty degrees out. Why would you go for a walk?"

"I need my exercise. And..."

"I've told you stay inside unless it's above fifty. You're going to get yourself sick. You don't need a walk; you need to stay healthy."

"I'm fine."

"Just stay inside today, okay Mom?"

"We'll go to the store. The store is inside."

"Mitzi can't take you?"

“Mitzi isn’t my daughter.”

“Mitzi can take you to church even though she’s not your daughter.”

“Mitzi is only a driver for God.”

“Well, I can’t take you to the store today. Wait until tomorrow. What do you need?”

“I need milk and cod. I only have meat left. I need fish for Friday.”

“I know, Mother. I told you I would take you, but I can’t today. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“Is the cake ready for Sam?”

“Yes, it was ready last night.”

“You finished it yesterday? Why didn’t you do it today?”

Because I am going to get a job today. “I thought his party was yesterday.”

“No, Mom. It’s today.”

“I was confused since his birthday was last week. My mistake.”

“I hope it’s not stale.”

“It’s delicious.”

“Okay, I’ll be by before I pick Sam up from school. Bye, Mom.”

“You’ll take me to the store tomorrow?”

“Bye, Mom.”

“Bye-bye.”

I asked her to take me to the store on Monday. I asked her to take me to the store again yesterday. I need more milk, and I need to buy cod for Friday since all I have left in my house is meat and fruit. I can eat the fruit today, but I will not have any left for

Friday, and I finished the milk on Sam's cake from a box. This is why I need my car. My children took away my car six years ago, so now I wait and wait and wait for them to take me places, because they're so busy. Evangelia teaches high school English, and I know she is very busy with her students and Sam and his birthday party, but I can't eat meat on Wednesdays or Fridays, and I need to go to the store. She wants Mitzi to take me, but I will only ask Mitzi to take me to church during the daytime. I will not ask her to take me to the store. She always offers since we live so close, but I will not be a bother to her, too.

When I get my job, my children will have to let me drive again so I can take myself to work. Then, I will drive Mitzi to church, so it doesn't take so long to get there. And I will go to the store by myself without one of my children watching me, and I'll forget to buy box cakes. Instead, I'll buy brandy and oranges and make κεϊκ. Baking American desserts is so easy; I never understand why anyone needs the box. American cookies made from scratch take minutes, but Greek cookies made from scratch can take days. Sam thinks his American friends won't like Greek food, but when they try κεϊκ, the brandy will tingle their noses while the orange candies their tongues. American box cakes don't do anything to the nose, and they poison the mouth.

After I start driving again, I won't stop taking my walks. I love them. I go every day at 8:30, which is the same time the boy who rents the basement next door runs. Once he brought my mail that had been sent to his house by mistake and told me his name is Julio Sanchez. Julio is young and looks like he's Greek and has big arms, and I go for my walks the same time he runs. He smiles and waves at me every day, even though he is tired and sweaty. He makes time to wave at me.

I will drive myself to the store after I drive myself to the restaurant, and I will show all my children that I can drive and that I can have a job. I would never tell my Evangelia that I am going to go work. She doesn't like me to leave the house, because she worries about me. I tell her that I'm fine. I raised five children; I can leave the house. Soon I'll be leaving the house every day to go to work. I was never able to leave my house much when the children were at home, so this will be very different for me. Sometimes Evangelia and Demetrios tell me that I should sell my house since it is old and big and move somewhere smaller. I am fine here.

Everything in my life has been the same for so long. I still hold my mother's cross when I get afraid like I did on the ship to America. I still eat off the same set of dishes my children did when they were young, and I sleep under the same bedspread my husband and I shared. I wear the same black dress every April 23 that I wore to his funeral seventeen years ago. The only way I can ever tell things have changed is by all of the new pictures. All of my children keep giving me pictures and pictures and pictures of their weddings, their vacations, their children, their dogs. I love them all so much, but I have run out of places for them. Maybe when I get money from my job, I will buy some big books for pictures and then keep them in my drawers. I will buy some other new things, too; maybe a new black dress since I have gotten fat, and I am afraid that I will make the buttons pop off. Or maybe I would like a bigger TV. The job will be different, and I will like that. Evangelia won't like me working, but that's what I'm going to do. She's always telling me to take my medicine, go to the doctor, sleep more. I wish she would tell me these things while we're shopping at the store.

“γεια σου?”

“Uh, hello?”

“ναι?”

“Uh, may I speak with Mary Pana, Panig, Panigo...?”

“Mary Panagoulis.”

“Yes. May I speak with Mary Panagoulis?”

“Αυτή είναι η Mary”

“Oh, um, is there anyone there that speaks English? My name is Al, and I’m calling from Pacific Power with some billing questions.”

“Αρι.”

“Okay, well, thank you for your time.”

If I could, I would tell Al that my sons take care of my bills, or that I want to switch from Pacific Power to Rocky Mountain Power. Since I haven’t been using my dishwasher or oven as much, Rocky Mountain Power would save me money. Their usage rates are lower. But I can’t explain that to Al, since no one had time to teach me English. I learned to understand it from *All My Children*, *General Hospital* and *Days of Our Lives*, but I still can’t speak it well. When I learned I was going to be marrying a man who picked me to go to America with him because I was beautiful, I wanted to learn to speak English right away. When I got here, I told him “thank you” in English, but that was all I knew. We were starting to learn English at my school, but then the war and the Nazis came, and my school closed. When the Nazis were in our home, I was wishing that I would have learned German. Most of the Nazis that came to our village were not so bad, most of them. We were very lucky in Chania, even if there were disappearances. Sometimes entire families would disappear. I was always too afraid to look for the

bodies. Sometimes I have dreams where they followed me here, and I will find them under my bed or in the oven, or my grandchildren will dig up my neighbor's corpses from the backyard. Yes, God looked after my family, even if we did lose Petros. I guess I'm lucky that I know where his body is.

"Hello?"

"Ma?"

"Petros?"

"Yes, Ma."

"Hello! How are you?"

"I'm fine, Ma. How are you?"

"Fine, fine."

"Did you get to go on your walk?"

"Yes."

"Did you see the neighbor?"

"Uh, who? What neighbor? How is your trip?"

"It's okay. I'm not looking forward to driving back on Friday, but it's okay."

"How is the weather in Denver?"

"It's snowing a little. Oh, hold on. Let me call you back. I have another call coming in from my boss."

"Fine, fine."

"Bye, Ma."

"Bye-bye."

"Ma, wait!"

“Yes?”

“Did the cable guy come today?”

“What?”

“The cable guy was supposed to come to set up your new cable box and DVR.”

“No, no one has come today.”

“I’ll call you back. Bye, Ma.”

My son Petros works at a bank, and he works so hard. He does so well at his job that his boss sends him to Denver for at least one week every month to help with a bank there. Usually Petros is the one to take me to the store, but he can’t when he goes on his work trips. Sometimes he says he wishes he worked at the bank in Denver, but he won’t leave Wyoming. Petros is the oldest, and he always tries to take care of things. He tries very hard, as hard as he works at his job. He’s a good boy. I should have asked him about Rocky Mountain Power and told him to call Al instead of the cable man he’s been talking about.

“Hello?”

“Mommy?”

“Chrisanthi?”

“Hi, Mommy.”

“Hello, honey. How are you?”

“I’m good. Just on my way to get the kids some lunch. Girls, say ‘hi’ to your Yia-Yia.”

“Hi Yia-Yia,” one of them says.

“Well, that was just Caitlin. Lindsey and Allison are being quiet. Here, Mommy, tell them hello.”

“γεια σου εγγόνοι μου!”

“Why do you talk to them in Greek? It’s not like you can’t tell them ‘hello’ in English.”

“They should learn Greek.”

“They’re not going to learn Greek. Their dad doesn’t speak Greek.”

“You could teach them. You have plenty of time.”

“Stop it, Mother.”

“Fine, fine. When are they going to come visit their Yia-Yia?”

“I don’t know.”

“You never know.”

“No, because like I’ve been telling you, we want to take them to Disneyworld on Dan’s next vacation, so we won’t be back to Wyoming for a while.”

“Why would you take them to Disneyland?”

“Disneyworld. Because that’s where little girls go on vacation. Not to Wyoming, and not to Crete.”

“You should bring them here. Or go to Crete.”

“Okay, Mommy. I can’t talk about this again. I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Bye. Girls, tell Yia-Yia...” But she hung up.

My Chrisanthi. She is so smart; all my children are so smart. They learned so much in school. All five of them went to college, and they are all so smart, especially my

Nektarios. He is a dentist. My son, the doctor! Petros works at his bank, Evangelia teaches, Demetrios has his restaurant. My Chrisanthi, she started college, but then she met her husband and quit. She started school, and she wanted to go to law school, be a lawyer. I told her, "Go." Go to school, and learn to be a lawyer. But she met Dan in college who was already a lawyer, and she left. His job is in Minnesota, and now she stays home with her children like I did. Dan, he is very nice. He is not so handsome, but he is very, very nice. I love Chrisanthi, but I was disappointed when she quit college. I could only go to school through sixth grade in Greece, and after the war started, I could not go back. I can read and write some, but my children are so lucky to be able to go to school and become smart and have their jobs. Chrisanthi could have been so smart. I never had time for a job or school. I tell her to find her own job or finish college when her girls start school, but she yells that she doesn't want to and that it is none of my business. "Fine, fine!" I tell her, but it is my business, because I know she will regret it one day when she is old and at home.

I don't understand why Chrisanthi was the one to quit school. It should have been Petros or Evangelia since it was the most difficult for them when they started. All five of my children eventually learned English, but it was hardest for Petros and Evangelia since there was no English in our house before they began school. My husband, he spoke English because of his work, but it would have taken me so long to learn since I was never a smart woman. So it was just Greek in our house until Petros and Evangelia started to speak English. They learned it together in school, and they helped teach Demetrios and Chrisanthi. By the time Nektarios began kindergarten, he was so bright

that he spoke beautiful, fluent English with his brothers and sisters and their father. They spoke Greek only to me, except during prayer. Prayers *must* be in Greek.

Anyway, Petros and Evangelia's trouble with school was not because they weren't smart; it was the spics. They tormented my children and thought they were better than them, because they could speak English. They found someone who they thought was even more different than they were, and so they persecuted my children. Two or three of them at a time would find one of my sons alone, and they would chase my daughters around school. Mitzi's family was the only Greek family that lived close by, but her sons were much younger than mine, so my children were all alone in that school. Petros used to come home bloodied and bruised three days a week, but, finally around the time he started fourth grade, he was able to defend himself. Sometimes he would look after Evangelia and then later Demetrios and Chrisanthi if he could. The spics were determined, though, and they would come after my children, like those two Nazis who went after my brother, Petros.

Once they followed Evangelia three blocks home from school when she was by herself. Those animals ripped her underwear from under her dress, ran off with them and passed them around the class the next day. They tormented my children until they were in high school when my children became popular and athletic. Then they gave it back to the spics. They didn't dare touch my Nektarios even when he was very young, but he knew all about them.

“Hi, you've reached the voicemail of Dr. Nick Panagoulis, DDS. I am unavailable to come to the phone right now, but leave me a message, and I will get back to you as

soon as I can. If you need immediate assistance, please call my office at 307-265-5008. Thank you, and have a great day.”

“Nektarios! How are you! Everything is fine here. I miss you very much, and I wanted to tell you hello. Come by soon if you have time. Please tell Emily hello from me. I love you so much.”

My Nektarios. He is so smart, and he is so busy with his patients. I can see him now in his white coat with his big, dentist glasses while he fills a cavity or gently pulls a wisdom tooth. He doesn't have time to come see me as often as my other children, because he is a doctor and so busy with his work. But I call him every day to tell him and his beautiful wife Emily hello. I will surprise him with my job after I start. He eats his lunch at Demetrios's restaurant two or three times a week, and I will surprise him when I take his order. If only it were Nektarios's restaurant, I would have had a job many years ago. My Nektarios has always been so special. I lost three children after Chrisanthi, and I prayed and prayed to Saint Nektarios. I asked him to cure the diseases inside of me and to give me another child. If I were a smarter woman, I would have prayed sooner. I could feel each of them leaving me, and I could feel their pain. It hurt them so much to leave me, and the pain was greater each time. It ripped the insides of me, like pulling apart filo dough. With each child, there was less and less inside of me to tear.

When my husband told me that the doctor said I was pregnant again, I knew Saint Nektarios had answered my prayers and that I was going to bring a healthy baby boy named Nektarios into the world. When my Nektarios came, he fixed me. I love all my children so much, but Nektarios, he was able to fix me. My first four children were all born in six years, but it took six more years after Chrisanthi for Nektarios to come into

the world. And he was perfect. He was always so smart. He knew how important school was and always got the best grades. And he was so good at sports! I loved watching him. When he was on the wrestling team, we bought him all new shoes, and then again for track. Petros and Demetrios shared shoes with their father, but since Nektarios was so much younger, we got him new ones. I love my Petros and my Demetrios, but Nektarios was such an athlete that his coach told his father that he needed new shoes, so we bought them for him.

Nektarios reminds me a little of my brother Spyros. He was the oldest, and Spyros, like my Nektarios, was so smart and fed our family. He always brought such joy to my mother and father, just like my Nektarios did for my husband and me. Spyros was an excellent fisherman, and he always brought home the biggest catches. I could never make the sheep stay long enough to shear them very well, but Spyros was always able to keep them very still and gather their wool. He was the best with the goats, too, making them fatter and better tasting, except for one. This goat was surly and would snap and paw at everyone who came to her. But she liked me. I named her Evangelia after my older sister, because my sister was gruff with Spyros as well. Evangelia the goat would follow me around and let me pet her. She was the only animal that I was able to feed and care for better than Spyros. One morning I went to feed her, but she was gone. Spyros had slaughtered her for meals that week, even though there were two other goats that were older and leaner. I thought they were more prepared for slaughter, but I was not a smart girl. Spyros would have known better, and so we ate Evangelia the goat, which was much more than most of our neighbors had. Yes, Nektarios is much like Spyros. Nektarios will always feed his family.

“Hello?”

“Ma?”

“Nektarios?”

“No, it’s Petros.”

“Petros again? Hi, honey.”

“Hi, Ma. I just wanted to let you know that I talked to the cable company, and they’re going to send someone out to set up your DVR sometime tomorrow. Is that okay?”

“It’s fine.”

“Ma, you should be more excited about this. Do you understand what it is? It records TV shows so that you don’t have to be at home watching them when they’re on. So you can go on your walks, you can go to the store, or be at church, and then come home and watch *Days of Our Lives* or whatever was on while you were gone. It’s going to be really good for you.”

“I love it, honey. Thank you so much.”

“You don’t have it yet. Has Angie taken you to the store yet?”

“No, she says tomorrow.”

“I’ll talk to her. Sorry, Ma. Do you have anything to eat that’s not meat?”

“I’m fine, honey. Don’t worry about me.”

“No, I’ll call her. But I have a meeting I have to get to, so I’ll call you tonight, okay?”

“Okay, honey. I can’t wait.”

“Bye, Ma.”

“Bye-bye. I love you so much.”

My Petros tries so hard. When his father died, it broke him, and now he tries to be just like his father and take care of everything. Petros told me that he has dreams where he comes into my house, and his father is sitting at the kitchen table, and then Petros tells his father how hard he tries.

Since Petros was my first child, I was not a good mother, and so he was always small. I made him an easy target for the spics. His father never liked that they were able to beat him up. But on the day they shamed Evangelia, he was like a German. That night, his father pushed Petros into the garage, and he practiced fighting on Petros. He was so small and was not very good at fighting, like my brother with the Nazis. My husband told me he worried that if Petros did not defend his sister, they would shame Evangelia like the Nazis shamed so many other Greek girls whose brothers did not protect them. I couldn't tell him that sometimes it does not matter how hard a brother tries to protect his sister.

Every time Petros told me about the spics chasing him, it was like I was that little girl in Chania, watching from my window as those two Nazis laughed while they chased my brother. Every time Petros told me they chased him, my heart would pound with the same terror I felt in 1942. I feared that if his father did not make him better at fighting, one day I would go looking for my son Petros and find his body like I found my brother's. So I told my husband that Petros must not be like my brother, and I told myself that Evangelia must not be like me. He must survive, and he must protect his sister. So Petros and his father kept practicing his fighting. Petros learned, even if it hurt him.

Petros has always tried so hard, like he did in the garage with his father. Now he wants to teach me to drive again like my husband did so long ago, but none of my other children think it's a good idea. Petros will think it's a good idea for me to work. When I get my job, he will help me and tell me I'm a good waitress. Petros should be my first customer. His father would be so proud of him.

"Hello?"

"Ma?"

"Petros?"

"No, it's Demo."

"Demetrios! How are you? I need to talk to you about something. I will come to the restaurant and talk to you."

"I don't have time to talk or for you to visit today. It's really busy here. But I needed to ask you if you could make me Δίπλες for the weekend?"

"Δίπλες? Why do you need Δίπλες?"

"For the restaurant."

"Your cooks can't make them?"

"I can't schedule them to be here all night. But one of my big customers wanted some, and I told him I would see what I could do."

"You want to make your poor old mother make cookies for three days? She's arthritic and fragile and too old for baking three straight days. And Evangelia says I need to sleep more."

"I know they're difficult, so if you don't want to make them, I understand."

No, Demetrios, you don't know. You have never baked for three days straight.

"No, it's fine. I'll have them ready for Saturday."

"Thanks, Ma. I really appreciate it."

"It's fine. I need to start cooking."

"Wait! Just one more thing. What did you tell me to add to the παστίσιο?"

"Don't add anything. Just fry whatever cheese you're using in the σαγανάκι instead of your cheap pan."

"I'll have to order another one, but I'll try it."

"Did you finally take the κουκιές off your menu?"

"Yes, I did. You were right. Changing the color didn't help at all. It just won't sell."

"I need to go to the store. Will you take me?"

"For the Δίπλες?"

"No, for milk and cod. I only have meat left."

"I'm sorry, I can't take you tonight. I have to tend the bar until we close. I'm really sorry. I'll take you tomorrow, okay? But I need to get back to the kitchen. Thank you for making the Δίπλες. This is going to be a big sale for me."

"It's fine, honey."

"Bye, Ma."

"Bye-bye."

Well, I guess my job will have to wait a little longer, but it's fine. I've waited 38 years; I'll wait till Saturday. I will be tired, so I will need some days to rest. I will get my job on Monday. But for today, I need milk and cod from the store. Baking the Δίπλες is

going to make me hungry. The last time I made them was for Nektarios's wedding, and I threw up from kneading the dough, and I was much younger then.

"Yia Yia's Restaurant. This is Demo."

"Demetrios!"

"What is it, Ma? I really need to get back to the kitchen."

"There's an emergency with my power. You must come over now."

"Did a bulb go out somewhere or something? I'll look at it tomorrow."

"No, no come now! Pacific Power called me!"

"What?"

"Yes, his name was Al. He just called me, and you must come talk to him right now!"

"That damn ancient house. Okay, Ma. I'll be right there."

Now that my son is not so busy, I'm sure he will have time to go to the store.

###

Lovie and Hate

Danny hated his dog. And today, on his twelfth birthday, Danny hated him more than he ever had before. Today, Lovie the dog had ruined his life.

Even though now Danny was never going to be able to leave his bedroom again, the day began promisingly. He was surprised by the positive turnout his party got. This was the first year he had ever had the courage to throw a birthday party, because he never believed his mom when she told him that his classmates would come, but he was turning twelve and felt ready to make a change. He mailed sixteen invitations, and he couldn't believe it when eleven people said they would come, and the twelfth unannounced guest would be the biggest surprise of all. As they planned the party, he complained about the babyish fire truck theme his mother insisted they use since they still had leftover decorations from his six year-old cousin's birthday party, but he woke up to find that she made the streamers, balloons, fireman hats and flames on the giant sheet cake look pretty manly. Even though he wasn't going to start middle school for a few more weeks, today felt like the most important first day of school he would ever have, and it was going great. His mom bought him a brand new, expensive outfit for the party, and the white and blue striped button down shirt looked perfect on him, even if his mom made him tuck it in. In fact, the morning's only real glitch was when he found Lovie chewing on one of the new tennis shoes his mom got him for gym class, but Danny just threw the ruined sneaker in his closet. He could tell his mom tomorrow.

Danny was average, maybe even a little plain, whereas Lovie was extraordinary. Danny was regular size for a pre-teen, perhaps even leaning toward small, and his voice was just beginning to change. Lovie was an exquisite eight pound Cockapoo, a designer

Cocker Spaniel and Poodle crossbreed. Danny wasn't especially funny, smart, charismatic or memorable. Lovie had the breeding to compete in dog shows. Danny had dark hair with green eyes and light skin that was beginning to show unsightly traces of pubescent acne. Lovie had a feathery white coat and perfectly soulful brown puppy eyes. Danny liked typical things like Transformers, science fiction, the Red Wings and girls--one girl in particular. Lovie enjoyed naps, cuddling with guests and pretending not to be malicious. Even though Danny liked dogs on principle, Lovie made Danny realize that evil comes in cute.

Danny's twelfth birthday wasn't the first holiday Lovie had ruined, nor Danny suspected, would it be the last. Christmas morning, four years ago, Danny heard an annoying yip coming from a poinsettia-shaded package. Picturing a small Rottweiler, Doberman or maybe even a German shepherd that would someday grow into his bark, Danny became excited. He raced his little sister Elizabeth to the package, and after he elbowed her at such an angle that their mother couldn't see, he beat her there. Delighted, he shredded through wrapping paper, tore open the box and was promptly blinded by a sharp blistering pain. A cream cheese shaded monster had just leapt from the package, smarting Danny on the bridge of nose, leaving him with a trail of blood down his new Christmas pajamas. As Danny went to bathroom, he yelled that he would try not to drip on the carpet, but his mother was ominously more interested in playing with her new son. Although he bitterly self-administered first aid and slammed his drawers while he found a clean pair of pajamas, Danny was willing to overlook this potentially minor mishap. After all it could happen to any puppy--even a good one. He brainstormed names on his

way back to the living room, and as he waffled between Hemi and Tonka, his mother announced, “Danny, meet Lovie!”

The party wasn’t supposed to begin until 1:30, but Danny began peeking out of his living room curtains for arriving guests around noon, even though his mom kept telling him to be patient while she finished cleaning the house. At 1:15, Elizabeth began skipping around him in a circle, singing, “Nobody’s coming, nobody’s coming” while Lovie chased her ankles. Finally, after six rounds, their mom finally stopped vacuuming and made Elizabeth stop and apologize. At 1:24, just as Danny was sure that this was going to be another birthday spent with his mom and sister, he saw *two* cars idling in front of his house. He jumped and fist pumped.

“Mom, they’re here!” he yelled.

“That’s great, sweetie. I told you. Elizabeth put Lovie outside, please,” she yelled back. Danny fist pumped again, and the doorbell chimed. He quickly untucked his shirt and held his breath as he opened the door.

Nathan Capponi and Kara Holstein stood in doorway, each carrying a present. Kara waved to the remaining car and handed him a small, bright blue bag with a yellow bow in the top corner. Danny had been so worried about people attending his party that he had forgotten that they would bring presents if they did come.

“Thanks, Kara,” he said quietly, smiling into the floor.

“Uh-huh.”

“Happy birthday, dude.” Nathan pounded Danny’s free hand.

“Thanks. Dude.” Nathan and Kara followed Danny into his kitchen where his mother was waiting with soda and punch.

“Hi, you two. I’m Cathy, Danny’s mom. Would you like anything to drink? I can take that from you.” She took Nathan’s gift and placed it on the table next to the cake.

“Anything diet,” Kara said. She was pretty, but definitely the second prettiest girl in Danny’s class.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I didn’t buy any diet. Would you like some Kool Aid?”

“Sure. Whatever.” Danny’s mom handed her a plastic yellow cups with flames on the bottom.

“What are your friends’ names, Danny?”

“Oh, yeah. These are my friends. Kara and Nathan.” Danny smiled down at the floor again. He certainly never would have called Kara his friend before. She almost never spoke to Danny except to tell him that she didn’t like his clothes. And even though Nathan talked about Star Wars too much, he wasn’t wearing one of his Darth Vader shirts today, and he and Kara were both *at* Danny’s house, so they were his friends.

“Well, welcome, Kara and Nathan. Danny got a Wii for his birthday today, and it’s all set up downstairs. Do you guys want to play it?” She winked at Danny.

Danny stared at his mom. Danny had mentioned getting one the first time he saw the commercial months ago, but his mom said it was too expensive. He hadn’t even bothered to ask for one for his birthday.

“A Wii? Sweet, dude,” Nathan yelled, and gave Danny a high five.

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s pretty sweet.” Danny couldn’t believe it.

“Wii’s okay. But I’m going first,” Kara said.

Danny was about to lead them downstairs when the doorbell rang again.

“Answer the door, and I’ll show them where to go,” his mom said.

Zoey Renton, who liked to whip Danny with her waist-long braid, was at the door, carrying a bright yellow, paper bag with red tissue paper. Fortunately, she wore her hair down that day. Malcolm Ray, Griffin Chadderdon, Lizzie May and Tony Kohler all arrived with more presents for Danny minutes after Zoey, and Danny introduced each of them to his mom as his “friend.”

The only thing that could have made the party better was convincing his mom that his sister should be outside with Lovie instead of playing Wii with his friends. But even Elizabeth wasn’t being too bad, and Danny felt the happiest he could remember.

They were playing Wii golf when the doorbell rang again. Danny dashed back upstairs, and greeted Carl Stockton and Preston Richardson. Danny had hated Carl since first grade after Carl stole Danny’s Red Wings hat at the bus stop. Danny told everyone who would listen what Carl had done, but no one, including his teacher, principal, school police officer or mother, would believe him and insisted that he lost it. Carl denied everything, and Danny was still waiting for a formal apology. Preston was Carl’s best friend, so Danny hated him, too.

But, Danny reminded himself, today was a new start. Even though his mother had made him pick up after Lovie in the back yard for the rest of the winter to make him pay off the new hat she had to buy and as punishment for “lying,” it was time to move on. Besides, Carl was the best basketball player at their elementary school, and Danny wanted to try out for the middle school team.

“What’s up, dudes?” Danny asked with his fist out. When neither of them moved, Danny dropped his hand. “We’re playing Wii in the basement.”

“Sweet. Carl doesn’t have Wii yet,” Preston said.

“I’m just waiting for Christmas. I told you that,” Carl said quickly. Danny smiled, and they went downstairs.

Jasper Domenici was the tenth guest to arrive, and when the doorbell rang for the eleventh time, Danny stayed downstairs. He wasn’t especially excited to see Alex Hennagin, the final guest who had RSVP’d. Alex had given lice to Danny two years ago, and Danny wasn’t convinced that it wouldn’t happen again. But when his mom yelled for him to come upstairs, Danny forfeited his turn at Wii bowling.

“Danny, we have an unexpected guest,” his mom said as he came up the stairs.

Danny’s breath stopped. Standing before him in a radiant buttercup sundress was Gracie Mullen. She smiled at him beneath her long blonde hair that was pulled back by a ribbon that could have been sprinkled with sugar.

“Gracie, it is so nice to meet you,” Danny’s mother said. Gracie Mullen needed no introduction. Danny had loved her since she switched to his school in second grade, and he used to show his mother pictures of Gracie in his yearbook until last year when he got too old to tell his mom about girls. His mom used to tell him to invite Gracie to their house, but Danny would never have dreamed of it. In fact, Danny hadn’t even invited Gracie to his birthday party. His mom told him that *she* had mailed Gracie an invitation since Danny didn’t have the courage.

“Happy birthday, Danny,” she said politely handing him a small package covered in birthday hats and wrapped with the same ribbon that graced her hair. A silvery bra strap slipped out of her sleeve as she handed him the box.

“Here’s your present,” she reiterated and shook the package.

“Thanks, I…” but Danny went silent in her presence. She was enchanting. Her shampoo smelled like waterfalls which reminded Danny of camping. Her hair swished when she walked in front of him, making his stomach tickle, and she liked to talk about her dad’s truck. She was perfect. Just as he was painfully aware that every other guy at their school agreed with him, he knew that she would never go for him. But she was nice most of the time, and she was beautiful every time he looked at her, which was all the time.

She tucked her strap back into her dress, and Danny’s heart quickened as he was reminded of his closet.

“You two go have fun downstairs,” his mom said.

As Danny showed Gracie downstairs, he quickly forgot about underwear, and instead puffed his chest and lengthened his stride as they walked past the fiery décor and he told Gracie about his new Wii. They came downstairs to find Carl and Kara playing Wii golf. Carl wiffed his Wii swing and only drove the ball 30 yards when he caught sight of Gracie floating down the stairs. Kara rolled her eyes.

“Gracie! Kara just finished her turn. Do you want to play?” Carl offered as he snatched the controller out of Kara’s hand.

“Hey! I’m not finished,” she protested.

“You already played bowling and golf, and Gracie just got here. Here, I’ll get tennis started.” As Carl set up their singles match, Gracie left Danny standing alone in the large basement to join Carl. Preston and Tony sat with velour pillows in their laps on the couch parallel to Gracie, giving them the best view of her serve. Preston cheered for Carl like he always did, but Danny knew that Preston wasn’t thinking about Carl.

While Zoey and Elizabeth talked about unicorns in the corner, Kara and Lizzie sat on the perpendicular sofa, silently, with their arms crossed scowling at Gracie, who giggled when she missed her backhand return. The other four guys stood behind the couch where Preston and Tony sat. Carl slapped at the digital tennis ball for an ace and resounding win over Gracie.

“Gracie, want to play...” Danny began.

“Well, it’s a lot like how I play regular tennis. Except I’m a lot faster than the Wii players,” Carl bragged over Danny to Gracie. Danny couldn’t believe it; he would have let Gracie win in front of all their classmates. He knew how to treat women.

“Hey, everyone!” Alex Hennagin shouted as he came down the stairs. “Happy birthday, Danny!”

As Danny thanked Alex for coming to his party, he silently swore at him for causing Danny to miss taking one of the two remaining spots in Wii bowling to Preston and Malcolm. Danny joined Kara and Allison on the couch silently with his arms folded across his chest as Carl continued to disrespect Gracie in digital sports.

In the middle of the fifth frame, Elizabeth hopped down the stairs, ran directly in front of the TV and yelled, “Time for cake!” and then she immediately sprinted back upstairs. Her pigtails wagged back and forth as she bounded up the steps two at a time.

Danny felt unusually grateful for his annoying seven year-old little sister since Carl now had his hand on the small of Gracie's back as he showed her how to use the Wii Nunchuck.

Danny was thrilled with the seating arrangements around the dining room table as Tony and Preston came up from the basement. Gracie had selected a seat just two away from his between Elizabeth and Zoey, and even better, Carl sat on the other end of the table. A pile of colorful presents awaited him, and the small room felt alive with people and excitement, and it was all for Danny. His friends quieted as they were slowly illuminated in dazzling orange. His mother walked in with his birthday cake, dramatically ablaze with candles and icing. Even Carl pointed at the cake in admiration. Danny looked away from the blazing cake and glanced two seats over. He knew what his twelfth birthday wish was going to be as his stomach quivered.

A shrieking yip interrupted Danny's wishes as Lovie ran around in circles on the other side of the room with his tiny tongue trailing outside his mouth. The gentle "ooing" over Danny's cake was immediately replaced by loud chatter and giggling over the wildly adorable little dog who now joined them. His mother unceremoniously plunked the cake on the table.

"Elizabeth, I told you keep Lovie outside!" she yelled. Elizabeth followed the dog in, but all four of the girls had already surrounded the dog, leaving Danny and his candles and cake. Lovie stood on his hind legs, pawing at Gracie's knee and licking her face. She scooped him up into her cradling arms and rubbed his exposed belly.

As Gracie kissed Lovie's head and stroked his back, Danny felt a surge of affection for the little monster. All of the times Lovie had wronged him no longer

mattered. The years of “playful” nibbling on Danny’s ears and countless piles of vomit found exclusively on Danny’s pillows were forgotten. The incessant pant, sock, backpack, Red Wings sweater, homework, action figure, comic-book, poster, DVD, birthday shoes, and eight pound dumb bell chewing: all forgiven. Lovie was absolved of both times that he devoured Danny’s eukaryotic cell models baked from instant cake mix. Even his mother’s refusal to buy Danny an Optimus Prime Transformer action figure for \$28 and instead buying Lovie the red Coach collar for \$53 he wore today seemed worth it, as Danny watched Gracie cuddle with Lovie.

“Danny, he is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen! I love him!” she gushed.

Danny left the table to show his new affection for Lovie. Danny’s bicep moved against Gracie’s arm as, together, they pet Lovie. Carl scowled as he whispered to Preston behind his hand.

“Okay, everyone, should we sing ‘Happy Birthday’ before these candles go out?” Danny’s mother suggested, ushering Danny and the girls back to the table. Gracie delicately placed Lovie back on the ground, and he trotted out of the room. Danny hoped Lovie was going to go chew on something he found extra tasty; Lovie had earned it.

Danny’s mother began singing “Happy Birthday” as she re-lit the candles and stood behind him. The second verse began, and Danny realized how wonderful it was to enjoy twelve of his closest friends on his special day. Everyone smiled at him behind the warmth of the flames, and Danny mouthed the words along with them. The group sung their last “happy birthday to you,” his mother said, “Make a wish,” Malcolm yelled, “And many more” and Gracie was clapping. Danny closed his eyes and made his twelve-year wish, her hand in his as they walked down the hallway at their new middle school.

A small, familiar growl interrupted his reveries, and Danny opened his eyes to a birthday nightmare between the glow of his twelve birthday candles.

“Dude! Check those out!” Carl shouted as he pointed to the red and black underwear latched in Lovie’s teeth. Danny’s chest tightened, and sweat rushed to his hairline.

“Panties!” Preston yelled back as he elbowed Carl. Lovie released the underwear, revealing the distinguishable black heart on the behind. Danny immediately changed his birthday wish to a prayer that he was dreaming. He peeked over at Gracie who had already turned a crimson shade of red. His mother took a step toward him, and he could feel her staring into his back.

Zoey and Lizzie whispered to one another with big eyes, and Nathan looked confused.

“They’re not mine, Mommy,” Elizabeth offered.

Gracie’s eyes moved dangerously back and forth between Danny and Lovie. Danny wanted to tell her how he got them, but any words of explanation he could have provided remained stuck in his throat.

“Danny totally got some chick’s panties!” Carl laughed as he high-fived Preston.

“Whose are they, Danny?” Malcolm asked.

Gracie lowered her head.

“Boys, that’s enough,” his mother said quietly.

Gracie covered her face with her hands.

“There’s no way *Danny* went all the way,” Carl loudly whispered behind his hand to Preston.

Evidently, that was too much for Gracie, as she let out a humiliated sob that seemed to surprise her. Her hands shook over her mouth, and her red cheeks shone beneath her drizzling tears. She marched to her underwear, where Lovie still perched wagging his tail, and Gracie snatched them up without slowing her pace.

Just as she was about to leave the room, she turned and screamed, “Pervert!” and ran to the bathroom with a resounding slam of the door. Everyone simultaneously turned to stare at Danny. Carl erupted with laughter and every other male at the table, excluding Danny, quickly joined in. Kara shook her head in disgust. Lovie sat down, happily panting.

“Boys, not another word about. Downstairs,” his mother said sharply, silencing them.

“How did you get them?” Carl asked.

“Why don’t you all go downstairs and play Wii until your parents get here?”

“Did you take from them her house?” Carl persisted.

“Danny totally is a real pervert. He stole Gracie’s panties,” Preston said.

“Downstairs, now!” his mother shouted as she gripped Danny forcibly by the arm.

Danny couldn’t bear to look at them, see their stares, hear their whispers, watch their heads shake, and he didn’t look up from the floor as they retreated downstairs.

“Danny, is it true?” his mother quietly demanded as her nails tunneled into his forearm.

“No! I mean, I was, I was going to give them back,” he said.

“Go to your room, *now*. We’ll discuss this when everyone leaves.” She bent down to blow out the birthday candles, and Danny silently wished that his thirteenth birthday would never come.

“Go.”

Danny withdrew to his room and wondered how he would explain Gracie’s undergarments to his mother who had almost drawn blood from his arm. It began innocently enough. Danny and Gracie’s 5th grade class had gone swimming to celebrate their last day of school. Months later, Danny still had to rush to the bathroom every time he thought about Gracie’s checkered tankini. Prior to the class’s departure, the teacher instructed them to change into their swimsuits and leave their school clothes in their backpacks. Danny happened to be leaving the bathroom just as Gracie was putting her clothes into her knapsack and returning to their class. The classroom door closed behind her, and then Danny saw them. Lying on the floor as arresting and vivid as a traffic light, were Gracie Mullen’s red underwear with black, lacy trim and a matching large heart on the backside. After the rapid, exciting flush of seeing the panties wore off, Danny didn’t know what to do. If he left them, all of Mrs. Marken’s class would see the drawers beneath Gracie’s backpack and know they were hers. She would be humiliated, but he also didn’t know how to approach Gracie about her misplaced undies. Danny avoided eye contact with his mother when she washed his boxers, so talking to the girl he loved about her racy panties was inconceivable.

But he had to do *something*, and faced with the choice of confronting Gracie or allowing her to be publically humiliated, he knew what he had to do. Danny grabbed them off the ground, stuffed them in his bag and decided he would tell her what happened

when they returned from the pool. But swimming came and went, and much to Danny's dismay, Gracie was not alone for the remainder of the day. She was talking to Mrs. Marken, exchanging phone numbers and summer plans and playing Jenga with her friends. There was honestly never an opportunity for Danny to explain the situation and return the garment. He had no choice but to take them home with him for the summer.

Since they had been dropped into his life so unexpectedly, Danny had no course of action. When he got home from school, he hid them under a pile of old shoes in the corner of his closet. Danny considered throwing them away, but that seemed like a waste. He had honestly only looked at them once or twice all summer. He had almost forgotten that he even had them.

On the way to his bedroom, Danny stopped in front of the bathroom where Gracie was, probably sitting on the toilet, crying and covering herself with her arms in embarrassment. He had to tell her how he found her panties. A man would explain himself.

Heart racing, he gently rubbed his knuckles softly against the door, summoning the courage to actually knock. He tapped the door so slightly that not even he could hear anything, but gradually built up enough momentum to rap on the door loudly enough to elicit a response.

"Who is it?" Gracie managed through her tears.

"May I come in?" Danny managed.

"Leave me alone."

"I just want to talk to you," he said a little bit more loudly.

To his astonishment, Gracie opened the door. The ribbon in her hair had loosened and now slumped to one side. As she looked at him, her red face contorted into a malicious stare. Her jaw trembled, and her puffy eyes narrowed further.

“I thought it was your mother knocking,” she said, still gripping the door knob.

“What?”

“You have such a girl’s voice that I thought you were your mother.”

“No, it was me.” Danny said quietly as he looked down at the hallway carpet where he stood outside the bathroom.

“What do you want, pervert?”

“I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry, and that I got them...”

“You stole them out of my backpack the last day of school when we went to the pool. I thought I lost them, but I didn’t. You stole them from me,” Gracie said. Her tears had subsided, and she had moved outside the bathroom door frame.

“No, I didn’t. I...” Danny said as he shook his head urgently.

“Save it, pervert.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re going to be sorry. You’re going to be sorry you ever invited me to this party,” she stepped closer to him.

“I am sorry, though. Please, let me...”

“Not yet. You’re not sorry yet. You let them think that we, that I, *did* things. With *you*. The things they must be saying about me right now.” Her voice broke as she began crying again, and she stepped away from Danny, moving as far away as possible until she stood against the sink. She hung her head.

“I’ve never been so sorry,” Danny whispered as he stared at the floor. And it was true. A man would never have dishonored a woman like this.

Gracie looked up with enraged resolve.

“I’ve never done anything with anyone, and I sure wouldn’t start with you,” she breathed. She stepped toward him. “I’m going to make sure every single person in middle school knows what you did and what you are. You’ll be sorrier on the first day of school, Danny. I promise.” She calmly closed the door.

Danny went to his room where he found Lovie lounging on his bed. He opened his closet to find the brand new shoe Lovie had chewed up that morning to show his mom.

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Love Story

Hidden deep within the Big Horn Mountains and over 100 miles away from any town with a population over 1,000, Story, Wyoming rests as peacefully as the fawns who nap in the 332 residents' lawns. Pine trees densely cover the lush landscape, sparkling in the winter and providing hardly-needed shade in the summer. Snow-capped peaks, resting at altitudes so high that the sun can't reach, are visible even in the summer, where our Story takes place. The babbling Story Creek that runs from Fish Hatchery Road and twists through lawns, eventually emptying into the Platte River down the mountain, is home to rainbow trout so spoiled by residents they can reach twelve pounds. The trout, which Story ordinances protect from being removed from water, run along the creek as leisurely as the visiting grandchildren during summer vacations. If the children grow tired of tossing fish feed into the mouths of trout vaulting out of the water like dogs performing tricks, they can giggle at the coarse, rough tongues of deer as they lick bread from the children's hands, search for bears in neighbor's sheds, or ride horses alongside traffic down Piney Creek Road.

Tents can be seen pitched in back yards since fences don't exist, and camping doesn't get any better. The walk from the residential area to the Story Post Office is a hike, and picking wildflowers is simply a matter of strolling outside. Local reenactments of Fort Phil Kearny or the Wagon Box Fight replace movie theatres, Story Creek's icy waters render a beach superfluous, and the Big Horns are site enough for seeing. It is the perfect retirement community, full of some of the most beautiful scenery in the world and the nicest neighbors around. Visitors leave in awe of the raw, pristine beauty that they are certain exists only in fiction. People come for their own Story-book endings.

“I hate this godforsaken place,” Lloyd thought, as he pulled out his credit card to pay for a gallon of skim milk, a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and a loaf of wheat bread.

“\$17.73, Lloyd,” Bill Thompson told him.

“I can see that.” Lloyd pointed with his card to the register’s digital total. The Story Store general store was the only place in town to buy groceries, and though everyone else believed that the prices were so high because of the additional costs to transport the groceries from Sheridan to Story, Lloyd felt certain that the Thompson’s \$650,000 creek-front property was not financed by their humble beginnings as store clerks.

“Did you hear about the big finale tomorrow?”

“Sure did.” Lloyd lifted his bag. He wanted to escape the contrived “log” cabin and the even more artificial manager who worked there. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yep. Patricia reserved seats for us yesterday. Best seats in the house again this year.”

“What?” Panic washed over Lloyd. “I thought we had to wait until tomorrow morning to put out chairs this year.”

“Called in a favor with the mayor,” Bill said with a shrug.

“He’s your brother. And what’s the mayor got to do with it?”

“I just put them out there. I want good seats. We’ve had those seats for as long as I can remember. You must be excited for tomorrow, then?”

“Oh, well, I’m not. I dread it every year. Just don’t want the Old Lady all over me,” Lloyd said.

“Well, you better head over there. There were already at least ten chairs out yesterday.” Lloyd turned to leave. “See you tomorrow, Lloyd.”

Lloyd grumbled a goodbye to the closed door as he threw the groceries in the backseat of his old Cadillac, eager to get home. “Would have cost me five bucks at Wal-Mart.”

A smiling wooden bear wore a plaid scarf and held a picnic basket beneath one arm, and in his hands, a sign that read “LIVE LOVE STORY”, greeted visitors on the front porch of 12 Piney Creek Road. The large, antique-looking home sat beneath a massive widow-maker oak in the front yard. The vibrant greens of the fresh grass and thriving pines made the saloon brown of the house’s exterior brighter. The gentle gurgle of the Story Creek, just yards past the back porch, made the strawberry and raspberry gardens sweeter. Pussy willow branches danced among the thick, silky thread grass that lined the creek. A hummingbird drank leisurely from a feeder that hung on the front porch next to the friendly bear.

“Get out of here, you bastard,” Lloyd yelled as he flapped his hand menacingly at the bird. “Dammit, Ruby, your damn bird contraptions are attracting every bird in the Big Horns. There’s crap all over the deck.”

“You need to clean it up before the girls come over on Saturday. I would have, but Mary and I have been working on the house all day.” Lloyd refrained from pointing out that Ruby sat in her chair while their housekeeper, Mary, cleaned. He didn’t have time for fighting or to deal with crap.

“I can’t right now. The parade route is filling up with chairs, and I need to go save our spots,” he called as he headed to the closet.

“That’s impossible! Come to the kitchen.”

“Can’t, Ruby,” he called from inside the storage closet.

“There were rules this year, remember? No one was allowed to set up early, so there aren’t any chairs out there.” Lloyd continued digging. “Lloyd! There was a rule!” He slammed the door after he found the two remaining lawn chairs that had pink backs, green seats and black watermelon seeds all over them. Ruby had managed to break the other two in the set last summer when she sat down too quickly on separate occasions. With a chair on each arm, Lloyd stormed into the kitchen.

“I know there was a rule. I know they weren’t supposed to set up early. But they did. Bill and Patricia Thompson set up yesterday. There were ten other chairs out there *yesterday*. I know there was a rule. But it doesn’t matter, because everyone in Story is above the rules.” Ruby shook her head at him, and her glasses chain rattled. Perched on a stool with her walker in front of her, she wore her favorite pink cat shirt and jeans with an elastic waistband to accommodate her persistent expansion. “I’m going to see if I can find a place to set these up,” motioning his head toward the chairs.

“Always the dramatist. Since when are you so concerned about the parade? You complain more about the parade than you do about most things.” Lloyd watched a canyon wren land delicately on a bird house feeder from the large window that overlooked the creek and backyard from the kitchen. It was pecking directly into Ruby’s right ear.

“It’s not about me. You’ll complain all day if you can’t see. It’s all for you, *darling*.” Lloyd turned to leave the kitchen.

“Hurry home! You need to clean off the deck!” she yelled after him.

Fish Hatchery Road had all of the benefits of a city with friendlier service and a woodland landscape. Pinewood Quilt and Gift Shop, Secret Squirrel Vintage Clothing and the Story Art Station were home to some of the best shopping in the Big Horns. The Wagon Box Restaurant made a New York sirloin look like a happy meal, and there was always coffee and Story telling at the Hitchin' Post Diner. The members-only locales included the Story Women's Club and Lion's Club. Furry Fitness provided recreation, the Story Volunteer Fire Department maintained safety, the Post Office was the connection to the outside world, and the Story Library and Museum offered education and culture. If the buildings weren't labeled, they might be confused for modest Story homes since the businesses of Fish Hatchery Road had similar exteriors to many of the faux log cabins and an identical setting of thick timber and colorful wildflowers lined the sidewalk.

Lloyd crushed a daisy beneath his boot. There was not an open space from the Wagon Box down to the Post Office on either side of the street; he would have to watch the parade from the second row. This was the one event that Lloyd had actually wanted to attend since he moved to Story sixteen years ago, and he had bad seats. Everything else from his outfit to his breakfast in the morning had been carefully planned. But the anticipation for this moment was too great to let something like the back of some Storyite's bald head and his wife's bad dye job diminish Lloyd's escape from Story monotony, even if it would only last as long as it took a Camaro to drive down Fish Hatchery Road.

In a community full of residents over sixty-five and visitors who rarely exceeded the age of twelve, Story was full of undesirable women. They were fat with thinning hair and skin as wrinkly as Lloyd's. He was well aware that at seventy-eight, he was nothing

to be desired, but he wanted something to look at. He wanted to look at smooth, tight, young women with long, thick hair, colored for purposes other than hiding gray.

Watching them on TV was unsatisfying, because Lloyd didn't want to watch a beautiful woman; he wanted to *see* her. He felt like the last time he had seen a desirable woman was when he was still working and living in reality, which was, of course, outside Story. Tragically, he had never taken time to stop and truly appreciate the beauty of a young woman, because he didn't realize he would be taken away from them. Perhaps that was why Ruby forced him into the world of old hags and their grandchildren. He had thought about leaving her a couple times over the course of their forty-some year marriage, but it never went any further than an internal monologue. Ruby wouldn't have let him.

So, when Shirley Anne Cartwright had come over to inform Ruby that she had received a response from Ms. Wyoming in regards to her attendance at the parade, Lloyd had attentively listened to Women's Club business for the first time.

“She writes, ‘Dear Shirley Anne and Story Women's Club, It would be an honor to participate in the 23rd Annual Story Days Parade. Unfortunately, due to a prior commitment, I will not be available to attend the Pancake Breakfast (which is too bad since there's nothing I love more than homemade pancakes!), but I will be in Story by the start of the parade at noon. Thank you again for the invitation, and I cannot wait to experience one of the most beautiful places in the most beautiful state. Sincerely, Haylee Wasserburger, Ms. Wyoming 2012.’ Ruby, we're going to get Ms. Wyoming in our tiny parade. And she sent this picture with her autograph! Look at how beautiful she is.”

Lloyd stumbled up from the breakfast table, desperately searching for a coffee mug to refill, another piece of toast, anything to get closer to the photograph.

“Well, you’ve done it again.” Ruby disdained any successes of the Women’s Club under Shirley Anne. Ruby had been vying for the presidency of the club for the last ten years, but Lloyd was certain Shirley Anne would vacate the position only in death. “Congratulations, Shirley Anne. Congratulations,” Ruby said without a smile. But Lloyd was spellbound and didn’t notice his wife’s hostile felicitations. There, lying on his granite kitchen counter, was a young, gorgeous, crowned black and white woman. She smiled at him invitingly, and he accepted. He walked toward her dark, velvety hair, her tiny black dress and her ripe lips. She couldn’t have been over twenty-five.

“Well, I think she would be just perfect in a carriage,” Ruby started. He was startled by how much the woman on his counter resembled the Ruby that he had married so many years before, who now sat in his kitchen on a stool behind her walker.

She continued, “you know Freemans have...”

“Actually, I already spoke to Henry Pringle about this. He just bought a brand new Camaro, and Ms. Wyoming would look absolutely gorgeous in it.”

“Huh. Yes, well, I think a carriage would be more appropriate for the Story Parade.”

“I think the Camaro. Anyway, this is an achievement for the *entire* Women’s Club, not just me. Not just the president,” Shirley Anne said as she patted Ruby’s shoulder.

Lloyd felt Ruby recoil next to him. “Well, Shirley Anne, that’s real nice of you, including the whole group that way.”

“Oh, well, thank you. Of course it was my idea, but it was a group effort.”

“Say, I’ve been meaning to ask. Did I hear that your daughter got divorced *again*, or was that someone else?”

Ruby hid a smile behind her hand while Shirley Anne’s lips puckered.

“Ruby, I’ll see you at the meeting tomorrow,” Shirley Anne said finally.

And since that day, Lloyd had thought of little except the parade. Chasing the cats around the house with a broom no longer satisfied him, and his blood pressure remained almost steady as he cleaned the deck from Ruby’s bird feeders. Reveries of Haylee Wasserburger’s smooth complexion consumed him. In fact, he even bought a new outfit for the occasion. The humiliating “Story Character” maroon shirts with their names on the back that Ruby had made for the two of them years ago were just not going to do for Ms. Wyoming, even though Ruby forced him to wear it to every Story event. Instead, he secretly purchased a red Hawaiian shirt with blue waves on it from Kmart the last time they went to Sheridan. The clerk assured him it was festive yet stylish. Of course, Lloyd was not under the impression that he had any chance of anything more than a photograph with Ms. Wyoming; he wasn’t delusional. Simply looking at a young, desirable woman would be plenty satisfying.

That is, it would be, if he were able to find a seat. Reserving seats ahead of time was something he had overlooked. Stupidly, he assumed that the Storyites would have abided by the new rule that chairs were not to be set up until the day of the parade after last year’s debacle. Vodna Platt’s granddaughter had broken her arm while she was playing on the chairs outside of Pinewood Quilt while Vodna was inside working. Though Lloyd believed that Vodna was completely at fault for not watching the child, he had been relieved at the time, hopeful that if Ruby had to watch the parade from the

second row, they wouldn't have to go. But now, as Lloyd scanned Fish Hatchery Road lined with a vibrant assortment of lawn chairs, he cursed Vodna and her clumsy granddaughter. He and Ruby typically sat right in the heart of the street between the Hitchin' Post and the Story Art Station, but the street was full from the Lion's Club all the way down to the Fire Department. Across the street, in front of the Secret Squirrel, there was enough space between the curb and two rickety webbed seats to fit Lloyd's watermelon chairs. He parked his Cadillac in the middle of the street. As he was returning to his car, Edna Slogowski's yellow Volkswagen bug raced around his car with a honking hello, and as he started his engine back up, Harold Kegley's rusty pickup curved past him as well.

“Damn parade is making this town crazy with the traffic and law breaking,” Lloyd said out loud to the empty car. He tilted the rear view mirror down to look at his own face. “And Haylee Wasserburger will be worth every second of it.”

Lloyd pulled Ruby's newer, nicer, redder Cadillac around the parade route to find a place to park. He ignored her instructions as she told him where he should be looking. It was unusually warm, even for August, with temperatures in the low eighties without a cloud in the sky, and the smell of warm syrup still hung sticky in the air from the Lion's Club annual pancake breakfast earlier that morning. Last year, Lloyd ate nine pancakes in hopes of inducing a stomachache so severe that Ruby would have to let him leave the parade early, but instead she told him that he deserved it for his gluttony. This year, he didn't finish his fifth. His Hawaiian shirt was slightly snug, and he didn't want anything

hanging out of the bottom. He touched his pocket and felt the bump of a camera for the sixth time since they left the house.

“These dogs running around everywhere really detracts from the parade. I would never bring the cats. Manners have just disappeared,” Ruby said, clicking her tongue.

“No one brings cats anywhere, Ruby.”

“Turn down here. No, there! We’re going to miss the whole thing while you..,”

“We’re not going to miss anything,” Lloyd said so emphatically that he surprised Ruby into temporary silence. “We’re parking here. I’ll carry the cooler, and you use your walker. And if you want any of the candy the Shriners throw out, you’d better bring your grabber to get it yourself. I’m not doing it this year.”

“Hhmmph,” Ruby snorted as Lloyd got out of the car. She had been uncharacteristically quiet all morning. She had silently gone downstairs in her automated chair escalator after he had refused to put on the “Story Character” shirt. Then, after she saw what he selected to wear instead, she didn’t tell him that he looked ridiculous, needed a bigger size or that this would be the first time they had ever gone to a Story event without matching. Nor had she complained when he didn’t offer to drop her off, even though they were parked two blocks away. Lloyd was doing his best to ignore her disengagement.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked quietly, reaching her hand toward his button but quickly pulling away.

“No. No, there’s noth...”

“Fine. Good. Get the cooler. I’m not going to die of dehydration today, because you forgot the cooler. I’m going to fall on one of those kid’s damned leashes and fall and

break my hip again and then you'll have to push me around in a wheelchair until I die. Then you'll really be sorry."

Lloyd wondered if she was right.

11:55 came and went and there was still no sign of the parade beginning, and Lloyd imagined the worst. What if Haylee couldn't make it? "When does this thing start?" he demanded. The street was buzzing with Storyites crammed together in their vinyl, multicolored chairs. Visiting grandchildren were pulled by dogs on leashes, shoppers ran in and out of stores and the occasional electric wheelchair powered down the sidewalk.

"I don't know, Lloyd. I'm not running it. And when did you become so interested in floats," Ruby asked. "But if I were in charge, it would certainly start on time. Could you have gotten us worse seats? We're not going to see anything but people's backsides all day." Though Lloyd had initially convinced himself that these seats wouldn't be so bad, Ruby was right. Ms. Wyoming was going to disappear down the street as quickly as a Viagra. Making matters worse, Lloyd had unintentionally sat them next to the smuggest woman in Story.

"Ruby, have you heard everyone talking about Ms. Wyoming? She has been such a hit! Vodna Platt told me that there's at least 150 people here. That's got to be double last year," Shirley Anne gushed. A tiny white dog panted at her feet.

"There were 150 people here last year, too," Ruby said as she looked everywhere but at Shirley Anne.

“Well, you know, it’s like I was telling the parade committee. It’s not just me; it’s the entire Women’s Club...”

“June! June!” Ruby shouted at June Stafford who walked inches in front of her. “Look at you! Lloyd, isn’t she just a dear with her hat?” Half a dozen pink peonies grew from the top of her head. A straw hat was barely visible beneath them.

“Yes, you certainly do have a hat,” Lloyd said to the flowers.

“Oh, thank you both. But it’s nothing next to your famous Story shirts. But not today! Lloyd, where’s yours?”

“Oh, well, it’s...”

“Fred! Look at your wife in her hat!” Ruby interrupted.

“Just hoping she doesn’t pollinate on me,” Fred said. June and Ruby laughed.

“Fred, you’re too much. It’s so hot out today, I’m glad you all made it,” Ruby said as she fanned herself.

“We wouldn’t miss the Story parade for anything, would we, Fred? Well, we’d better hurry up to our seats. You both are going to be the first ones to see everything! Enjoy!”

“You’ll have a nice view from *behind*,” Fred whispered to Lloyd as they left.

After sniffing at Fred and June, Shirley Anne’s tiny mutt turned to Ruby. “Shirley Anne, would you mind keeping your dog out of my walker?” Ruby said as she flicked the tiny shih tzu with her shoe.

“Oh, Ruby. Charlie is just fine. He doesn’t bite.”

“She does,” Lloyd gestured to Ruby. “Move the dog.”

“Fine. Charlie, come on. You stay over here. Kyleigh! Will you please keep Charlie?” A five year-old blonde girl with a brown syrup stain running down her pink shirt came and took Charlie from Shirley Anne.

“Kyleigh, sweetheart, why don’t you stand on the other side of your grandma with the dog?” Ruby asked as she poked the dog with her grabber. Kyleigh giggled and snatched Ruby’s grabber. “Excuse me, Kyleigh. That belongs to me. I need it to reach things, because, you see, my back....” Kyleigh waved the metal stick that was just slightly bigger than she was.

“Look, Grammy! Look at the fat lady’s stick!” she squealed. Shirley Anne hardly pretended to conceal her laughter.

“Now listen here, young lady. If you do not put my grabber back in my hand this instant,” Ruby started as Lloyd gently unwrapped Kyleigh’s hands from the handle.

“Shirley Anne, is this the illegitimate one? Or is that a different grandkid?” She quit laughing.

“Kyleigh, take Charlie and sit on the curb and wait for the candy. The Shriners always throw some for the *children*,” Shirley Anne said, glaring at Ruby. She returned to her chair.

“If I were running the parade, I wouldn’t allow dogs,” Ruby told Lloyd without bothering to lower her voice.

“I wouldn’t allow Kyleigh,” Lloyd whispered in her ear. She laughed.

A fire truck horn blasted the quiet Story air just around the corner from their watermelon seats, signaling the beginning of the 23rd Annual Story Days Parade.

“Dammit, Lloyd! These are the worst seats in town!” Ruby yelled as she threw her hands over her ears.

After his heart rate slowed from the shock of the noise, Lloyd became excited as the Volunteer Fire Department Truck rounded the corner and began the parade. This was the moment for which he had been waiting weeks. Though the seating was subpar and sweat soaked crimson through his shirt, a divine, creamy young woman would parade before him in matter of minutes. Lloyd scanned the crowd of familiar, wrinkled faces. The Story of old ladies would be erased for a few goldenly youthful moments, and even though it may only be from behind, “Hindsight is always 20/20,” Lloyd thought.

Though the view from behind of the horses carrying the American and Wyoming flags was something Lloyd wanted to forget, the third parade entrant, the Wagon Box Restaurant’s oversized caboose float made from a repainted tractor, was an annual crowd favorite. It was not only one of the most attractive floats, but it also transported the grill and slow-cooked ribs for the picnic following the parade. It chugged up Fish Hatchery Road wafting the sharp aroma of spices and barbeque.

Betty Lou Kelly and her five granddaughters, all under twelve, followed the caboose on a wooden trailer wearing tie-dyed dresses, red wigs that added three inches to their height and feather boas, dancing to “Down on the Corner.”

“Out on the street, sayin the po-po,” Ruby sang as she bobbed her head and drummed on her knee. “Aren’t they just darling in their outfits, Lloyd?” Lloyd stared at Betty Lou, the owner of the town’s only fashion store, as she danced around in clothing that Lloyd had to assume was purchased the same decade that Ruby was Haylee’s size; the fifties. “Oh, they’re stopping to take a picture in front of the store! We need to get

out of the way.” Story’s parade frequently stopped for business owners to take pictures in front of their stores, grandchildren to pose with their Shriner grandfathers, and this year, there would be an additional pause for Lloyd to stand next to Ms. Wyoming. Lloyd gathered the chairs and moved behind Kyleigh and Shirley Anne while Ruby scooted behind him on her walker.

Betty Lou and her visiting granddaughters from Denver arranged themselves in front of the store, posed for the picture and ran back onto the float. Lloyd had forgotten the cooler, and one of the granddaughters kicked it into the grass.

“Thanks, Wheelers! Aren’t my girls just gorgeous? Love the shirt, Ruby,” Betty Lou waved at them as she hopped back on her trailer to jiggle to “Born on the Bayou.”

“Lloyd, get the cooler. It’s so warm,” she instructed him as she fanned herself. As he pulled the cooler back to Ruby, Lloyd imagined Haylee Wasserburger waving to him to the beat of “Suzie Q” as she sparkled with her crown on her head and diamonds of sweat on her arms.

Norm DeMott’s inaugural blue 1953 Ford F-Series truck crawled past them, the Sheridan Korein Band impaired every hearing aid in Story, and six members of the Lion’s Club barely survived their customary lion suits before Ruby managed to open the cooler and seize a small bottle of water with her grabber. Lloyd was too distracted to offer to help or even guide the grabber’s clutches around the water. Seven more floats sailed by, and Lloyd was beginning to feel anxious.

“Shirley Anne, how many entrants are there this year?” he asked after nearly tripping over Kyleigh and Charlie.

“Twenty-two. And number twenty-two is, of course, my, or *the*, the big finale!” she said, clapping her hands together.

As Ruby complained about the heat, the rate at which the ice in the cooler melted, and how Lloyd kept getting out of his chair and blocking the view of the second row even though no one sat behind them, Lloyd distractedly observed the parade that passed before him. Normally he would honk Bill Thompson’s clown nose just because Lloyd knew it hurt, or laugh at the giant Shriners stuffed inside of their tiny cars. But this year, he didn’t even cheer the little gymnasts who cartwheeled and somersaulted ahead of the Furry Fitness float. Nor did he coil in disgust at Roger and Linda Snider who were walking on treadmills in shorts and sweatbands on top of the trailer.

“Goooo Roger! Get him, Linda!” Ruby shouted. They both pumped their arms triumphantly into the air as she yelled for them. Amidst three separate and unwelcome visits from Charlie, there was a parade-tailored reenactment of the Wagon Box Fight that ended with confetti shooting out of the participants’ rifles, and four separate Storyite wives waived from various classic cars driven by their husbands. Finally, after a curious rendition of “America the Beautiful” performed by Earl Thrush on the bagpipe in a kilt, float number twenty passed the Secret Squirrel. Raymond Tibbs sat on his Story Art Station float inexplicably dressed as Santa with several young children in nightgowns drawing pictures at his feet.

“What do you think it smells like under that suit?” Ruby said, and Lloyd’s focus on Haylee Wasserburger was momentarily broken as he laughed. Resuming his concentration, Lloyd began to pace. His eyes did not waiver from the Post Office’s “All Hail the Red, White and Blue” float on which aptly colored streamers lined the truck and

trailer while Lucy and Edith, Story's resident Postwomen, waved to the crowd in Waldo outfits. Lloyd mentally pushed the float up Fish Hatchery Road as forcefully as he could, but it continued as slowly as if Lloyd were physically pushing it. At last, after what seemed like so many waves that Lucy and Edith would never be able to reach the top aisle of PO boxes again, there was enough space to fit the convertible that would deliver Lloyd's dream escape to him. His expectations were so electric that he actually put his hand on his chest to keep his heart valve from bursting. He fingered the camera in his pocket, and popped a piece of peppermint gum into his mouth, ready to ask Ms. Wyoming for a photo and perhaps even graze her shoulder with a shaky hand.

Lloyd heard it first. Behind a wall of heat waves wiggling in the air, the gentle grumble of Henry Pringle's Camaro announced her arrival. Weeks of fantasizing, longing and expectations had culminated into this moment. The engine revved, and Lloyd inhaled the metallic exhaust fumes. His body tingled. Finally, gliding down Fish Hatchery Road, the dazzling Haylee Wasserburger sat on top of a gleaming red sports car. She was everything Lloyd needed her to be. She was tight and still curvy, firm yet smooth, and young but a woman. Her hair, deliciously free of greys, glossed beneath the sun, and it whispered to Lloyd with a soft "swish" as she turned and waved right at him with an arm that didn't jiggle and smiled brightly between two unwrinkled eyes that looked directly into his own.

Surprised by the intimacy of their moment, Lloyd drew back and the thick heel of his orthotic shoe caught on Ruby's walker. He flailed backwards, but caught himself. Ruby erupted.

“Don’t worry. She wasn’t watching,” Ruby managed through her laughter as she slapped her leg. Lloyd scowled a sheepish scowl at her, and she only laughed harder. By the time Lloyd recovered, Ms. Wyoming was half-way up the street by the Hitchin’ Post Diner. As he watched June Stafford fumble with a camera while Fred stood with his arm around Haylee Wasserburger’s tiny waist, Lloyd painfully realized that his photo opportunity had passed. Ruby finally finished laughing.

“Are you done now?”

Lloyd didn’t bother looking at her as he unbuttoned the Hawaiian shirt to reveal the “Story Character” underneath. Defeated, he dropped it on the ground between them. Ruby picked up the shirt with her grabber and tossed it behind her.

###

April Showers

He seemed more insignificant than nice. If he hadn't offered to help me with my furniture, I wouldn't have even remembered his first name. The first time I met him, I was hauling in all of my suits. I could smell the booze on him then.

"I'll bet wearing one of those gets hot in the summer time," he said. That was the first thing he said to me. I only remember because it was such a stupid thing to say. I wanted to roll my eyes at him and ask what he knew about wearing a suit, but I didn't know anyone here. So I ignored the uncomfortable feeling he gave me and pretended to drink the Busch Light beer he had forced into my hand. I should have known then. I politely indulged him and laughed as he kept chanting, "May, June, July," after I told him that my name was Mae; an unoriginal, unfunny joke that I've been hearing since first grade.

He told me a little bit about Omaha and the apartment complex and how he knew everything about my building since he had been living in the building next door for eight years or something. He asked what brought me here, and I told him my new job and then painfully had to explain to him what PR is. He started telling me how impressive it was that I was able to get a good, high-paying job right out of college. Then he told me about the furniture store where he worked as a deliveryman, and by a tragic coincidence, I had already bought lawn chairs for my balcony and a dining room table and chairs from there the previous day. He laughed stupidly, high-fived me and told me that he would deliver and build my new furniture for free. He had a surprisingly nice truck, and although furniture-delivery seemed like an unusual career for Kevin since he wasn't that much

bigger than I am, I have a Camry, and it was going to save me around \$150. So I gave him my phone number solely to facilitate the construction of my dining room table.

He delivered it for me the next day, and I really was grateful. It was nice of him to do that for me. In addition to the 24 pack of Busch Light I bought him, I thanked him numerous times. But honestly, the whole exchange couldn't have taken him more than an hour. I wonder if all of this wouldn't have happened if I just would have paid the \$150. He high-fived me again after I gave him the beer and said we would be even if I would just come over and have a beer with him and his buddies at his apartment that night. I told him I was busy.

“You can't be busy yet. You just moved here. Come over, make some new friends, have some beers, and we'll be even. Otherwise you're going to keep owing me,” he taunted. He coerced me into agreement.

Do you ever feel responsible?

For what?

For what happened to you.

How could I possibly be responsible for what he did to me?

You've told me a number of times that you should have known for a variety of reasons.

Maybe I should have. But I was just trying to save some money. And I wanted a friend here. I had no one, so I tried to be nice to the weird guy next door who hit on me and gave me the creeps. I just wanted to find a friend.

You shouldn't have known. You couldn't have known.

He texted me that evening to come over, and when I got there, it was an apartment with an identical floor plan to my own, but everything was wrong. A large, middle-aged woman with yellow, sickly hair was doing sit-ups with an exercise ball in front of the TV. That was the first time I ever saw Amber. Kevin and two older men sat in the dining room smoking pot. Even their soiled carpet crunched beneath my sandals. Kevin looked forty, and the two men he sat with had to have been at least ten years older than he. All three of them looked me up and down as I approached them, hungry with either the munchies or for me; I wasn't sure which.

The stench of weed made the air sickly and heavy like an outhouse, and my arm hairs stood up as I anxiously sipped on cheap, acrid beer. Kevin introduced me as, "May, June, July" to Roger and the other guy; I can't remember his name anymore. He tried to get Amber, who was exercising in jeans and heels just feet from us, to stop and meet me, but she refused. He loudly identified her as his live-in girlfriend, who "bitches and moans and never pays for anything" and had once been married to Roger. I waited for an angry response or outburst from Amber, or even a comment on the incestuous nature of the threesome, but instead she just kept rolling with her ball. Apparently this group did not wait for weekends or even 4:00 p.m. to drink, and after harassing me for only finishing one beer and refusing to smoke with them, I announced that I needed to go home to finish unpacking. On my way to the door, Kevin told me that he would text me tomorrow to see if I wanted to come over again since they partied every night.

"You've been texting other women?" Amber screamed as she stood, looking at me as though I had somehow been unfaithful to her. Her reaction caught me so off-guard

that I couldn't find the words to explain to her that I would be uninterested in her alcoholic, furniture-moving boyfriend even if the earth required repopulating. Instead, I just blinked.

"Come on, Amber. She's new in town, and she's just a kid. It's not anything," Kevin said through gasps as he took another hit.

"You cheating, lying bastard. You're always after these skinny sluts," she said to him still staring at me. She reeked of exercise and cheap beer as if she had spilled some down the front of her before she started her sit-ups. I turned to everyone else, thanked them for inviting me and left.

Kevin did text me the next day and the day after that, and the weekend after and for a couple more weekends after that, but I never responded. Since our balconies were next to one another, I avoided mine unless both Kevin's truck and Amber's car were gone, even though the balcony was why I moved into that apartment. Outside of the casual wave or polite greeting that Amber always returned with a cold stare when I ran into one of them in the parking lot, that bizarre weekend encounter months ago had been our last conversation.

Everything in my life was going well until that day. A Media Coordinator had never been promoted to a Managerial position in under eighteen months; it took me six. I liked my apartment; I loved my dining room table. It was the prettiest thing in my apartment, and I wanted to keep it that way so I never used it. Even when I had company, we almost always ate in the living room on TV trays. The table was always set with beautiful flowered dishes with matching linen napkins and place mats. I even bought expensive flute wine glasses. I was getting adjusted to Omaha and was making a few

friends. Ironically, I probably hadn't seen Kevin more than five times since I moved in, and since being on a balcony isn't an issue when it's snowing, that didn't bother me so much anymore.

It was the second day of my new job when I got the call from the lawyer telling me Kevin had died. I was stunned. It didn't make any sense. He even laughed when I thought Kevin's last name was "Harbaugh" instead of "Hawking." But why would I remember his last name? He wasn't significant to me until then. The lawyer was rude and refused to tell me anything more than that Kevin had left everything to me including a small black box I was supposed to come and pick up from his office, and he didn't know why Kevin left it all to me. I had to beg him to tell me how Kevin died. But I should have figured that it was booze that killed him. I'm just glad that it was long-term instead of something quick like a car accident. Hopefully, it was really painful, and he suffered a lot.

Do you think he died regretting what he did?

Not in the least bit.

But he left you everything he had. You don't think that was his way of apologizing or even repenting?

Everything he had was nothing. And if he had been truly sorry, he would have apologized to my face while he was alive. He would have looked me in the eye and told me what he did and then apologized to my face while he was alive.

If he hadn't have died, you may not have ever known. He may have never stopped.

Would that have been so bad? At least then I wouldn't have gone crazy. And I wouldn't be scared all the time. And I would be able to look at myself. And I wouldn't always think that everyone is watching me.

He's through watching you.

I didn't feel safe on the way to the lawyer's office. But my desire to know what was in this mysterious black box that Kevin left me outweighed my fears. The lawyer told me that Kevin had gone to "great lengths" to ensure that I got this box. I just had to go to his office and sign the forms that his assistant had for me, and the box would be mine. I would get a check for the value of the rest of his estate within a couple weeks.

"It's not a fortune or anything, but it should help you out a little bit," the lawyer had told me.

When I arrived at the office, a young man who identified himself as Brian repeated the same things that the lawyer had already told me. I was probably being rude, but I needed to find out what was going on, so I told him a little too forcefully that I already knew all of that and that I just wanted the box. I felt certain that it would explain why a stranger had bequeathed everything he owned to me, and I desperately needed an explanation. I mechanically signed four or five forms where a sticker with an orange arrow pointed while Brian went to retrieve my package from I don't know where. He came back, and as I handed him the documents, he presented the box to me in what seemed like slow motion.

I stared at it for a few moments without a guess as to what it might hold. There was no rational or normal reason that a man who I didn't like or even know would have

done any of this. I grabbed the box and pulled open the lid. The box contained only an innocuous stack of CDs, or what I thought were CDs, rubber-banded together. There were about ten identical, unlabeled discs in jewel cases that repeated the same color sequence. I think the first one was red, or maybe it was blue.

“Brian? Brian, right?” He nodded. “Can I listen to these here? Do you have a computer that I can use for just a few minutes? I have my own headphones with me. I’m just so curious about what is on these that I don’t want to wait until I get home.”

“Oh, sure. I’ll have to watch you since I have a lot of confidential information about Mr. Kooper’s clients on my computer, but you can use your headphones.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate it.” He pulled out his chair as I took my headphones out of my purse. I sat down, and Brian politely pushed me back in.

“Brian, I’m Mae.”

“I know.”

“It’s nice to meet you, and thank you again for letting me do this. I’m sure you’re busy.”

“Not at all. I’ll get this set up for you.” He inserted the first CD that I had pulled from the top of the stack as I put on the headphones. Any noise, sound, word or voice would come as a complete surprise to me as I was certain that I couldn’t remember what Kevin’s voice sounded like. But I knew that I would get my explanation.

Some media program that I had never heard of whirred to life on Brian’s computer, and I clicked play.

Instead of a voice, I heard the sound of water pattering and saw the image of a steamy shower. Kevin had left me DVDs.

I never could have prepared myself for the image I was watching. It was me in my shower. White foam covered my hair and bubbled down onto my face. My body was exposed, my eyes closed. My silhouette filled the computer screen as I blindly stood beneath the shower head, slightly cocking my head from one side to the other, rinsing shampoo from my hair.

I heard Brian breathe in deeply behind me and step away from the desk. I was frozen.

I bent over to grab a conditioner bottle off the bathtub ledge as I exposed my right shoulder blade. The drunken mistake I made my freshman year of college was revealed as the white lily tattoo appeared against my skin which had turned red from the water temperature. I massaged my head with my hands against the background of my white and navy flowered shower curtain. My shampoo lathered and swelled, and a tress of my hair covered the leaf of my lily.

Brian grabbed the mouse and minimized the naked me. He placed his hands on top of mine. They were shaking.

“I’m calling the police,” he quietly said and immediately turned and left me alone.

I was still on the computer. I was still exposed, watched, violated on Brian’s computer. I pounded the “Eject” button, but the disc drive wouldn’t open fast enough, so I beat the processing unit with my whole palm. I slapped the device to get me out of it. The DVD started to come out, and then immediately ducked itself back inside. I gouged the button a few more times, and when the disc drive finally slid out again, I held it open so it couldn’t hide from me. With both hands, I tried to break the disc, but it just bent. CDs had always looked so fragile and delicate, but they were surprisingly resilient. I bent

and twisted at the disc again, and finally on my fourth attempt, the disc split into just five pieces. My hands tingled and rang, and the image of the pathetically fragmented disc didn't comfort or satisfy me at all; my hands just hurt.

"I called the police," Brian said to me.

"Don't look at me!" I screamed. My arms instinctively rushed to cover my chest, and I hung my head to shield my face from his gaze.

"I'm sorry." He turned around and spoke to the wall. "I'm sorry I saw it. Or you. I'm sorry I saw you. But the police are coming. I can make you some coffee, and you can wait..."

"I'm not waiting here. I'm going home." I snatched the box off his desk.

"Wait, I..."

"Don't look at me!" I screamed again.

Do you ever wonder how he did it?

Sometimes. The police said he probably did it while he was building my table, but the how doesn't really matter. The why doesn't even really matter to me. Just that he did it. That's what matters.

Do you feel like you know why?

No. I don't know why, and I don't know why me. Or maybe it's not just me. Maybe he's done this to other women. I don't know, and I don't know how or why, but I don't particularly care.

Do you care if he's done this to other women?

No. It sounds awful and selfish, but I can't deal with anyone else's pain. I can't deal with my own.

I don't think that's selfish.

After a drive home that I can't remember, I pulled into the parking lot and the only open space was next to Kevin's silver pickup. I imagined myself driving head-on into that truck, then dumping gas all over it and laughing while it exploded. Instead, I just parked and got out and started beating the driver's side door with my fists.

After banging in a couple minor dents, I realized that I was punching my own car. The car that Kevin had driven while he thought of me naked had become my property.

"You skinny slut," I heard a trashy voice scream. Amber, who had gained weight since I last saw her, was marching toward me with wet hair. Chunks of it were beginning to freeze. "He told me you two were fucking this whole time. I knew from the first time I met you that you were after him. And now he's left me with nothing." She continued on, but my blood had become too hot to listen.

"He told you we were having sex?"

"You're still lying about it? He leaves you everything, and you're still lying." My hands had balled up into fists. Despite the cold, I could feel my neck down to my arms reddening; it felt like hives. I was allergic to the idea of having sex with Kevin. My nails made dents inside my palms.

"The closest I ever came to having sex with your boyfriend was him beating off to me in the shower on his videotapes. So fuck him, and fuck you. Go get drunk," I said as I

finally released my fists and grabbed the box of DVDs from my car and walked toward my building.

“You’re lying. Come back!” she yelled as she pulled my shoulder to face her. My skin burned beneath her hand.

“Don’t you dare touch me, you filth. Don’t you dare touch me with your disgusting hands that touched, that touched, *him*.”

Amber started pulled her hand away and began pleading. “Just give me his truck. That’s all I want. Just the truck.” She tried to take the box from me, and I pulled away. “You can keep the rest! I just want to sell the truck and have money for my kid.” Then she touched me, and it made my arm start burning again, and I spit on her.

You spit on her?

Yes.

That’s new. Were you sorry you spit on her?

Not for a second. He violated me. He took my privacy and my safety and my dignity, and all she cared about was getting his money.

She didn’t want all of it. And she said she wanted the money for her child.

He told me that she didn’t pay for anything. And even if he did take everything from her, she was letting him. They lived together for God’s sake. And she’s obviously not too concerned about her kid who doesn’t live with her while she drinks and smokes pot like an 18 year-old. I never saw either one of them with kids. And she has the nerve to touch me with the same hands that touched him. I would spit on her every time.

How much did he leave you?

Nothing compared to what he took from me.

I went inside and sat on my living room floor and stared at the box for what must have been hours. Nothing had ever happened on my living room floor that was worth watching so I felt safest there. I drew all my curtains and blinds, and I put an oversized sweatshirt on top of the suit that I wore to work that day and covered my legs with blankets. I didn't know if there were cameras hidden in the art on my walls or concealed behind a book on my desk or even if someone was watching me stare at the box. But I wasn't going to let them see any more of me. I was scared to know how much of me they had already seen and what was on the DVDs that sat in the container in front of me.

I had become sticky with sweat from all my layers when I realized that I had to know. I had to know what at least Kevin had seen of me. I had to know how I had unknowingly displayed myself as he watched behind the curtain of a camera and was now shielded by his own death. I don't believe in ghosts or spirits or Heaven, and even if there is one Kevin wouldn't be there, but I wondered if I could ever really hide myself from him. Was he in the room with me now, watching me like he did in life? Was he whispering in my ear the details and particulars of how he recorded me? Was he listing off the names of the other people who had seen me naked inside of my shower? Was he laughing at me as I foolishly cloaked myself beneath layers of clothes?

"Well let's see these then, you bastard!" I screamed into my empty apartment. I took my laptop off my desk and put in a disc from the box.

There I was again, shaving this time. The camera was looking down over me, and the lingering shaving cream pointed out the spots I missed as I propped my leg up against

the ceramic lining of the bathtub. I watched myself rinse off my legs and grab the conditioner, but it slipped out of my recorded hand. Some of the ruffles that lined the top of window curtain were barely visible on the very bottom of the screen. The top of the window was high enough so that a camera would capture everything that wasn't directly beneath it, and then I could only see the top of my hair, shoulders, breasts and feet. I calmly picked up the conditioner and continued.

I watched Mae, an ordinary naked woman, take an incredibly ordinary shower. She was just shaving and washing her hair; she wasn't performing for anyone nor was she hiding anything. She was just showering.

As the video crudely cut to another shower, I realized I had to get the camera out of my bathroom window. Someone could have still been watching the inside of my empty shower waiting for me. Kevin, his buddies, his furniture store or the entire internet could have been waiting for me to get undressed out of their line of sight, hear the swish of an opening shower curtain and then their show begins. I couldn't have that.

Overly-clothed, I stood in my bathtub and grabbed a fistful of curtain and pulled. The curtain rod tumbled down into the tub, and I held the fabric in my hand. Just above the top ruffles in the corner furthest away from the shower head was a white camera the same size as my thumb nail that blended in perfectly with my curtain. A piece of plastic attached to the back of the camera clipped it to the curtain, and I pushed the corner of the clip with my hand and released it. I dropped the curtain and rolled the camera around in my hands. How could something so small capture so much? I slammed it down in the tub and the impact shattered it. I hope they enjoyed that view.

When did you start looking for the camera?

After I watched the first video. I just told you.

Not when you first got home? Or after you watched several videos? Or with the police?

No, after the first video. Haven't you listened?

Yes. I apologize.

When I returned to the living room, I watched three more showers that were identical to the first. Suddenly on the fourth video, I was on my back, displaying myself to him like a nude statue. Sometimes on weekends when I don't have much going on, I like to lie down in the bathtub and take long, hot showers. I just lie there and really enjoy the warmth and the sensation of me in the water. But I always thought I was alone. I always thought it was just for me and for my own personal, private pleasure. But then I was watching myself enjoying the water, and I was listening to the horrifying noises I make, and I wasn't alone. Something that was supposed to be exclusively for me had become a show for someone else. I had never been so ashamed.

My body had betrayed me. And I work so hard on it, too; my calorie counting and my workouts. He got to watch the fruits of my labors. I felt disgusting in the body that he had been watching, so I put on another sweatshirt.

You shouldn't be ashamed.

So I've heard.

Most women who have been victimized feel this way, but you shouldn't.

I'm not a victim.

You don't have to be.

The next disc was more of the same. Mostly mundane, dull showers but some had a few highlights. Of course there were clichéd showers with me singing, some where I did standing diamond pushups against the wall and others of me lying down in the shower. I muted those ones because I couldn't stand listening to my noises. There were a couple where I was shaving my bikini line. I wonder if he speculated about who it was that I was shaving for. Maybe he thought I was shaving for him. But the recordings never left the confines of my shower and my body.

Sometimes I wondered if I was watching the same shower on repeat. The hair, legs, breasts, tattoo never changed. Mae just cleaned herself over and over and over again. And more often than not, the routine stayed the same as well. If I hadn't been viewing my own naked body, I would have gotten bored. It was a reel of a woman showering who falsely assumed that she was doing so in privacy and seclusion. The discs contained about fifteen showers a piece, and at the end of the second DVD, I was terrified to realize that I had to go to the bathroom. But I couldn't. I couldn't go in the room that housed the shower where I had been watched for so long. I got up, slammed the bathroom door shut and resolved to never enter that room again. I peed in my kitchen sink.

I watched all the discs. It took me more than three days. I guess I must have eaten and slept, but I don't really remember doing either. It seems like it was on the second day that I convinced myself to peek through the blinds that covered my sliding glass doors and look out at my balcony. But I shut them immediately, because someone had built a

snowman that looked directly into my apartment, and I didn't want the snowman watching me. I couldn't take my clothes off, because I couldn't imagine exposing my bare body ever again. What if dead Kevin was watching me? Maybe he was in the snowman. But even if it wasn't Kevin in there, I couldn't stand for even an empty snowman to stare at me and see how dirty I was now. I knew he could see it even through all my clothes.

I didn't know how I was going to keep other people from seeing it. I'm a private person and a professional. I openly criticized people who discussed their personal lives at work. Like Alicia, the other Media Coordinator I beat out for the promotion. She was always talking about her boyfriends and her mom being sick and all this stuff that wasn't related to work. Not me. I told her business should stay business only. My personal life and professional life have always been separate, but how will I keep them separate when this is consuming every part of me? Maybe Alicia saw me on the internet. How can I ever go back to work aware that other people know that I masturbate in the shower on weekends and how poorly and rarely I shave my bikini line and that I have a man that films me taking showers? How am I ever going to be able to go back to work?

I thought about quitting my job, but then I started to consider what it would be like to buy groceries. Would the other shoppers know the disgusting things that I do in the shower? They might follow me around and yell the lyrics to the different James Brown songs that I liked to sing. Would the cashier assume that the coffee I was buying would be for drinking naked in the shower? Or that I needed to be buying less carbs and more veggies to do something about my problem-area thighs? Maybe he would throw in a razor and tell me to start taking care of down there. What good would it be to quit my

job if I can't check out at the grocery store? I am obscene and indecent and unfit to be seen by the children getting carried around in their shopping carts. So I kept using the kitchen sink.

But you knew by then.

Knew what?

That no one else saw the videos.

How would I know that?

Hadn't you talked to the police by that point?

The police never came.

They didn't?

No. I was by myself for three days just watching the recordings.

The police never came to your apartment after Brian called and told you that they couldn't find the videos on the internet? And that none of Kevin's friends knew about them?

Oh. No, no I don't think so. I don't remember the police. I would have remembered that.

You're sure the police didn't come?

I just said I was.

My mistake.

I finally finished watching the last disc, the last repulsive exploitation of cleanliness. It was going to be the last time I would ever be able to look at my own

uncovered skin. I still had my suit on beneath my two sweatshirts, and I had been sweating through all of these clothes for days. The choking smell of shame and perspiration radiated through my layers, and my hair was as greasy as Kevin.

I wanted him to apologize to me. I started pacing around my living room at the speed of a jog. He needed to be sorry for the unspeakable things that he had done to me. I found myself running around my dining room table. As I circled the table over and over again, I became enraged at his death and at the fact that I would never get so much as an apology from him. Or an explanation as to why he left me the DVDs and everything else he owned. He gave me everything he had, but it was nothing.

Panting, I went back to the empty box, and it suddenly contained something that it hadn't before. A piece of lined paper that had been carelessly ripped out of a notebook read, "Sorry Mae, June, July" in scribbled pencil. I picked it up and perforated the page. Those curled, ripped shreds on the side of the paper that attaches it to the spiral of the notebook always distracts me and makes me miss the message. The flirtatious moniker made my mouth taste like spoiled milk, and after reading the dismissive, disingenuous one-word apology over and over again, for the first time, I felt tears. Anger overwhelmed me and came flooding out of my eyes. I began screaming and tearing the paper apart. I tore the tears apart and then tore them even more. This was my only chance to scream at Kevin and tear him apart, so I screamed and screamed to show him how he had damaged me. The note was in thousands of tiny pieces that blended in with my carpet all over my living room.

So I vacuumed it up. Then I vacuumed my bedroom, kitchen, hallway and dining room so that if Kevin was in my apartment hiding behind his gutless note, he's in my vacuum now and can't see anything inside of my coat closet.

Do you believe in ghosts or spirits?

No.

Sometimes you talk about Kevin like he's a ghost.

Maybe he is.

You're Catholic, correct?

Yes.

Did you believe that he was in your apartment with you that day?

I didn't believe he was in my apartment with me when he was alive.

Do you truly not believe in Heaven?

I believe that Kevin is in hell.

Is that comforting to you?

I guess.

I'm glad that you've finally found something to comfort you.

All the movement of screaming and tearing and vacuuming inside all of my clothes made me even hotter, but I would melt away before I ever exposed myself again. My smell was getting worse. I was looking for perfume when I heard someone knock.

"Who's there?" I yelled from behind the door.

"It's Amber. I just want to talk to you."

“Get out of here.”

She started pounding on the door.

“I’m not letting you in,” I yelled over the banging.

“Look me in the face!”

Leaving the chain on, I peered at her through the cracked door. “What do you want from me? Hasn’t your worthless boyfriend taken enough?”

“The cops told me what he did to you. I didn’t know.” She looked at me expecting a response. “I promise I didn’t know. He ruined my life too, and I just need the truck. He ruined both our lives!”

“You were dating him. He was a stranger to me. Don’t make it sound the same.”

“But it is the same! I only started drinking again when he came into my life. I was taking care of my daughter, and I just got promoted to a sales manager at work. But then Kevin came in, and he made me feel worthless without him. He would tell me that Lucy loved her dad more than me, so I should just leave her alone. He would tell me about how I was driving him to be with other, more beautiful women, and then tell me all about the sex he had with them. He told me about having sex with you!”

“Shut up!” I screamed and slammed the door. I started sobbing and sat on the floor with my back to her, but she kept talking.

“I’m better now! I just needed for him to die. And you could just give me even ten grand from the truck for my daughter and child support and for a place of my own. You don’t need it. You’re young and beautiful and have money and a job. I don’t have any of that. Kevin did ruin my life. And I just need to move on. Just ten grand is all I’m asking for. Are you there? Please!”

I didn't respond. All I could see was my bathroom door. My own stench had become almost unbearable, and I wanted to get the smut from the last three days off me. I considered getting a hotel and showering there, but I needed to face the Mae that I had watched for days. Maybe she had been waiting in the shower for me the whole time. I opened the door and took off the first sweatshirt. I felt lighter. I walked inside the bathroom, and it was surprisingly easy to avoid the mirror. Glaring at the shower curtain that now looked more like prison bars than flower print, I stood with both feet on my bathmat and took off the second sweatshirt. I tried to take off my suit jacket; I really did. I needed to move on from this, too, but the jacket just wouldn't come off. Amber wanted ten grand, and I wanted to take off my suit jacket.

I stepped into my shower, wearing only slacks, a silk blouse, a jacket, socks, underwear and a bra. The water was cold, but I couldn't feel it.

So what are you going to do?

What do you mean?

Are you going to give her the truck?

I was thinking I would sell the truck and put a payment down on a house.

You're not going to give anything to Amber?

I can't live there anymore.

You don't have to.

Maybe she shouldn't live there, either.

So, what are you going to do?

I might give her some. Not ten grand, but some. I should get something from him.

Do you think she deserves something from him?

I know I deserve more. Maybe I'll keep sixty percent of everything and give her forty.

This isn't a business deal.

It's become one. He made her my partner. We're co-victims. Sixty-forty seems fair.

Nothing about this is fair. You can do whatever you want with the money.

I need a new dining room table.

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Theotokos and Other Stories About Love: The Writer's Essay

I began my graduate education at Creighton planning to study literature. Simply because I needed to enroll in another class, I signed up for Prof. Spencer's Creative Writing Workshop. While I was working on my first draft of *Lovie and Hate*, even though it was not very good, I knew that the course of my education was going to shift.

As I worked on the very first version of this story (the fifth is included in the thesis), I was confused and believed that writing was fun, a hobby or some form of entertainment. Since, I learned that writing anything good is not fun; it is hard. A first draft is an arduous, demanding process, and the revision, editing, rewriting of that same story is never-ending. It is likely that if I ever experience this sense of amusement again, it is because I am not thinking hard enough. I believe that this should be reserved for *reading* an outstanding piece of literature, which ultimately becomes inspiration for me to accomplish this same feat in my own writing. Especially as a relatively new student of creative writing, writing needs to be work.

Of course, I also love writing. What I now find enjoyable and motivating is when a story idea begins forming in my head. Whether inspiration comes in my own life, a dream, the news, or another fictional or creative source, this foundational step in the writing process is when I feel excited. The discovery of a potentially interesting, entertaining yet significant, weighty story is exhilarating.

This inspiration comes in both characters and in stories. In other words, the beginnings of a story can originate with either a character or the potential action within the story. When a character comes to me as this initial imaginative spur, it is often after I meet or read about a person who could become a main character (either protagonist or

antagonist) and then develop a storyline or plot around this potential figure. As is the case for most writers, I find the flaws in people most fascinating, particularly when someone does something inconsistent with his normal character or behavior. What will that character do when this inconsistency is revealed in the story? For example, an interview with journalist and stalking victim Erin Andrews was the inspiration behind *April Showers*. The reaction she had that ranged in emotion from shame, anger to comical (she admitted laughing about it in some therapy sessions) was so deep and diverse that I felt that I needed to write a story about it. I used her real feelings regarding the crime committed against her to create a character that, because of Andrews, I was confident would actually suffer through the emotions I gave her. Without Andrews, my own stalking victim would have been melodramatic or unbelievable.

Developing these character-inspired stories is when writing becomes more difficult. In order to avoid the “alone in a bathtub” story where a character simply reflects, I need to make something *happen* to the character in order to make a story. Does the character realize that he is being inconsistent? How does the character react if someone else exposes his inconsistency? I try to develop the plot of the story around that contradiction.

Characters and, thereby, people are ultimately what matter to me as a writer and as human being. The most important things in my life are the various people in it. In high school, my teacher in a philosophy class asked us to write down a list of the five most important things, aspects, facets, etc. in life. Several of my classmates wrote God, while others selected their ability to think or intellectual capacities. A few others selected “love” or “happiness.” I wrote, in no particular order, my mom, dad, sisters and

boyfriend. While I cringe at the inclusion of my high school boyfriend, the rest of the list remains intact. Writing enables me to better understand the complexities of humans. My attempts to convey the power of people, both good and bad, in literature makes my life richer. As Joseph Conrad said, “A writer without interest or sympathy for the foibles of his fellow man is not conceivable as a writer.” Every person is both a hero and a villain, and I need to understand what brings out each of these qualities in people. As a writer, this comprehension makes the work interesting and worthwhile. And as a person, it makes me better.

The other form of inspiration is some sort of physical occurrence. This can be an event, hobby, crime or celebration. As is the case in the real world, we need something to happen to be entertained while reading. For example, *Love Story* was based on an actual parade in Story, Wyoming. As I was sitting in my lawn chair along the parade route, I knew I had to write a story about this event. This was a reality that was so memorable, comical and interesting that it seemed stranger than fiction to me, but it was the reality of this town. I tried to make this seemingly alternate world the reality of my Story in *Love Story*. However, a fun parade on a lovely Saturday afternoon does not a story make. Obviously, there also must be some sort of conflict. Janet Burroway reasons, “The pattern of trouble and the effort to overcome it is repeated in every story on a larger or smaller scale” (170). The conflict needs to be significant enough that an event like a parade does not feel superficial, but when my fiction is too conflict-laden, like a story line with 9/11 or a school shooting, the work will probably become melodramatic.

Developing a physical event and a character into stories are very different processes for me. With a physical event, I know what is going to happen, but I need to

create the characters to whom this action happens. I try to determine who would be involved in this event, and who would be significantly affected or changed in these circumstances. What would the surrounding characters be doing here, and how would they change the main character's experience during the occurrence of my story? Unfortunately, because I tend to be more interested in characters, the stories are not as substantial as character-driven stories, but they are more entertaining.

I am always trying to find how to balance an engaging story with one that matters. How someone reacts to a situation, as opposed to the situation itself, is what is compelling in literature and in life. Of course, if a story is boring, readers will stop reading before they get to the characters' reaction.

I try to remind myself that I am always working to write something that I would go into a bookstore and want to read. I only pick out books that have action. I will only spend my money on something that engages me. As a reader, I find more philosophical or contemplative texts like a Camus or Coetzee "novel" boring and somewhat imposing. Not only do these stories involve the most minimal of plots, but they also tell me what to think. I am much more open to literature showing me an idea rather than telling me that idea and then explaining it and how it should make me feel.

Conversely, I do want to feel as though a novel has taught me something. As cliché as it might sound, I want to feel something. *The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* by Jonas Jonasson is wildly entertaining and engaging, but I did not finish the novel feeling like I had gained anything after reading it.

Atonement by Ian McEwan, on the other hand, is an excellent example of combining a lot of action with import. This is one of my favorite books, and this is

because I had to keep reading because I needed to know what was going to happen (like *The 100-Year-Old...*), but also because I finished feeling like my overall understanding of humans and empathy had increased. McEwan's brilliant commentary on the nature of literature and story-telling was not only told in a thrilling narrative, but it was also meaningful. *Atonement* was so good, that I actually felt embarrassed that I had ever written anything creatively. But after studying the novel more, it motivates me to practice and hone my own writing so that maybe someday I can write something that moves someone else as much as *Atonement* moved me.

While *Atonement* is a rich postmodern commentary, at its heart is a traditional love story. It has a human element to the story that makes it compelling as well as exciting and smart. I find love to be one of the most important aspects in every story I write.

I consider each story in this collection to be about love in some fashion. I used to think that if a story was about love, it could only be a "love story," existing only as some form of story about romantic love, but the more I read and wrote, I realized how foolish this assumption is. Love is a nuanced, complicated emotion, body, entity, thing, and, since I can't even select a term to classify it, is obviously exists in many forms. Exploring different types of loves and the evolution of love into different stages and phases has become a pursuit of mine as an artist.

All four pieces in this collection incorporate different kinds of love. *Theotokos* examines familial love. Like the Yia-Yia in the story, my Yia-Yia, or grandmother, is a devout Orthodox Christian who speaks very little English and loves her family unconditionally. I learned at a young age that the Greek language differentiates between

forms of love, and I remember my Yia-Yia, in her broken English and my even poorer Greek, trying to explain the four different types of love. I didn't understand what she was saying, but I intuitively understood that she felt differently about her family, husband, friends and Christ. I tried to suggest the complexities of these different feelings in this story and how they can materialize in one woman.

Lovie and Hate blends romantic and familial love. How does a young boy balance his desire for popularity, the affection of a beautiful young girl and figure out how to be a man when he lives in a home with his mom and sister? Although it might be superficial, I think young, romantic love is important in the development of longer, more meaningful relationships. Danny is in an important stage of his life as he is learning about himself, his sexuality and how to deal with all of the women in his life. The romantic love Danny is experiencing influences every aspect of his life from how he interacts with family to his social relationships with other kids. I wanted to demonstrate that while Danny's feelings for Gracie might not materialize into a serious relationship, it does play a meaningful role in other aspects of his life.

In *Love Story*, I tried to show what can happen when romantic love and familial love blend together. I am a product of not only divorced parents, but also of numerous other divorces throughout my extended family. As a result, I find couples that have been married for decades fascinating. I want to know, both as a writer and for my own life, how they do it. How do two people manage to not hate each other after spending their lives together? In *Love Story*, Lloyd wants to re-experience a physical attraction to another woman. It seems to me that this is not only realistic, but it's also okay in a marriage. Lloyd and Ruby's friendship is ultimately the source of their romantic love for

one another, so if Lloyd wants to look at another woman, he should be able to. Their love, romance and companionship have evolved over the years and even with wandering, cataract eyes, they'll always go home together.

April Showers depicts a situation in which romantic love morphs into something obsessive and dangerous. Mae is the obvious victim of Kevin's obsession, but Amber is also the victim of her own obsession with Kevin. While the story is Mae's, I wanted to explore how love can detrimentally affect both the object of another person's love in Mae as well as the subject of that damaging love in Amber. Kevin abuses both of these women, but in different ways, and of course, it affects the women differently. Both women will have to eventually find a way to love themselves and then, eventually, other people again. How can someone repair themselves from adverse love?

While those are the types of love featured predominantly in the thesis, these are not the only types of love I am interested in writing about and exploring. Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*, to me, is a love story depicting a young shortstop's love for baseball. What I find so remarkable about this novel is that Harbach manages to create a relationship between Henry and baseball that feels not only healthy and normal, but also reciprocal. He portrays Baseball as a character that loves and needs Henry as much as Henry loves and needs Baseball. Creating love between one person and anything other than another person is something I hope to achieve some day. I have tried it in a couple pieces not included in the thesis, but it has either come off as an obsession or a hobby. Harbach's novel is another that I will use as motivation and inspiration as I write in the future.

As I continue to write, I want to work on making my writing more physical. I tend to rely too heavily on dialogue or setting to convey details, and I need to work on integrating all of these to convey the same thing. It will make my writing more clear and concise, and make each story more cohesive, instead of an assembly of random facts and conversations.

I want to find ways to move a reader someday. I want someone to walk into a book store, pick up my book and *have* to go home to read it. Of course, I have to have a book first. I think that the only way I will accomplish this is if I follow a piece of advice given to me by Prof. Stefaniak last spring. She told me that I needed to write something that only I can write. To me, this is different than the old adage “Write what you know.” When I write something that only I can write, it has to be about a experience I know is meaningful, not necessarily an experience I’ve had. What I consider to be the two best stories in this collection (and that I’ve ever written) are evidence of that in *Love Story* and *Theotokos*. In *Love Story*, I consider the setting of Story, Wyoming to be the story’s biggest strength. I believe that only I could characterize Story in this way. Similarly, with *Theotokos*, my own perceptions of and experiences with Greek immigrant culture and family is something that only I could write. This is not to suggest that my way is the best or even a good way, but writing something only I could write is probably my best shot of getting noticed and subsequently published.

As Zadie Smith said, “The very reason I write is so that I might not sleepwalk through my entire life.” Since I became serious about writing two years ago, I notice and consider things that I never would have before. Writing opens my eyes to situations and possibilities in life that make me a better person.

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