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Four Short Stories about a Four Letter Word

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May 2008

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Abstract

This thesis falls under the creative category of the Honors Capstone Project and is a compilation of four short stories all written within the past year and a half. It draws from the author's educational background of English Textual Studies and the screenwriting track within the Television/Radio/Film major. It combines the learned technical aspects of the English language from the former and the creative, story-telling techniques from the latter.

Though the author has always been an avid writer, both academically and leisurely, it wasn't until the summer of 2007 after sophomore year of college that she became interested in short fiction writing. She had written full length feature scripts, started over half a dozen novels, but had never actually written a finished short story. An online fiction writing workshop changed that. After writing her first short story and having it workshopped by her classmates and professor, the short story medium became another outlet for her imagination.

The goal of this thesis project was to showcase the author's creative writing skills and produce a tangible work of art that others could read (the author having never published anything before this). Writing style, just like the English language, evolves over time for an author, and the Capstone Thesis is where this particular author chose to experiment and display the many facets of her writing garnered throughout her three years of college.

The art of story-telling is not easy. Many separate components make up a story: style, voice, narration, tone, point of view, dialogue, character development, exposition, story arc, syntax, diction, etc. They all must flow together, combine, and interact in order for the story to work as a whole, like mixing ingredients for recipe. It is not just the sentences that make up a story, nor the paragraphs one after the other; every single word comes into consideration.

For this thesis, the author wanted to write four different stories that would incorporate various components, essentially creating four different recipes to dishes that all would go into one single dinner. That is why two stories are written in third person point of view, past tense—one with the voice of the protagonist, the other with the voice of an impartial narrator. Two are written in present tense, first person—one from the viewpoint of a female character, the other from the perspective of a male character. Two of the stories are meant to be more light-hearted and funny. The other two have a more serious tone to the subject matter.

At first, there was no planned underlying theme or style intertwining all four stories. It was just to be a collection of short fiction based on the author's own preferences and inspired ideas. However, upon reflection and analysis before the last story "Once Upon a Time" was written, the theme of love was found to be unwittingly present throughout the three (hence the title of the thesis and the acronym of L-O-V-E that the individual story titles spell out). As the thesis project evolved, this theme became more and more apparent. The last piece was written with the theme of love and all its forms in mind. After that, it truly became a cohesive thesis that had similarities among the separate stories while at the same time maintaining the individual uniqueness that had been planned. The

entire thesis became an exploration of love and human relationships in every form. The first story “Lake” deals with romantic love, the abiding love between a husband and a wife. The second story “Once Upon a Time” is a little different in that it promotes love for oneself: respecting one’s own self-worth. The third story “Victoria Madeline” focuses on familial love, specifically the bond between sisters. And the fourth and final story “Escapades of a Zookeeper” centers on the love between friends—the trust and loyalty that comes from being dependent on someone (or something) else.

Each story was crafted at different times, but the editing and revisions of them overlapped when trying to compile them together into one thesis. “Lake,” “Escapades of a Zookeeper,” and “Victoria Madeline” were all workshopped formally in separate classes with Professors Phil LaMarche, Sarah Harwell, and Arthur Flowers respectively. Though writing processes vary with each writer, this author develops her stories mainly through her characters then builds the story from there. Because of the author’s education in film as well, she also tends to visualize scenes in her head first then strings them together into a full plot.

The following short stories can be viewed separately, one without the others, hopefully still with enjoyment. However, together they form the basis of this thesis. Together they explore the age old concept of love and its intricacies affecting life. And only together do they represent the author’s true writing ability and developed style, which has evolved throughout her college career and which will still continue to evolve long after.

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And to the rest of the Honors staff. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to finally get my stories together.

Lake

For Paul.

Three hundred and sixty days.

Or was it sixty-one?

Oh hell.

Jeremy struggled with the digital watch on his wrist, trying to punch the tiny side buttons while at the same time attempting to focus long enough to read what it said. And stay upright. The room started to spin from concentrating too hard. Finally, he made out the date. It took him another few minutes to count backwards.

Three hundred and sixty-*three* days.

He'd been searching for almost an entire year and finally ended up here. The spinning room wasn't exactly a room, but rather the northern mountains of Montana. It was midday, and the sun was directly overhead. Rays bounced off the water in white hot streaks forcing him to squint just to see. The lake stretched on for miles, seeming to blend in with the horizon and continue upward. The water was unnaturally clear, mirroring the blue sky so perfectly he couldn't tell where this world ended and the next one began.

Why didn't he think to come here in the first place?

Jeremy's head began to throb as he thought too hard. Or rather, thought at all. He looked around the embankment, taking in the trees towering above, so green and vibrant they looked photo-shopped. He then looked down at his stained plaid button-up and ratty jeans and grimaced. If anything was out of place in this achingly beautiful picture it was him.

A breeze whipped his hair against his face and caused him to sway. It was easier to blame the swaying on the wind. Jeremy sighed. Almost anyone could find peace in a place like this.

He unzipped his pants and started to pee on one of the trees. Unfortunately, the breeze was still making him unsteady.

He ended up peeing on his own foot.

His eyes narrowed as he continued to survey the area. Why the hell was it so perfect? Jeremy zipped up and stumbled towards the edge of the lake. He was almost positive this was it. Time was another one of those forces he couldn't contend with which only fueled his desperation that this *had* to be it.

He forced himself to close his eyes. The test.

If they could find him here then this was the end of the proverbial road. Black took over, and he waited half fearful, half defiant, willing them to come. Those all-consuming feelings and memories he could never escape, even in sleep, should have surged forward. Should have overpowered him.

A small ghost of a smile played at his lips when all he could focus on were the chirping of the birds above. He shouldn't have been surprised.

He'd felt it as he drove up the winding trail of the mountain. Knew that this was it. Had to be it. The air was thinner here. Purer. Besides the damn birds, it was silent. He even felt closer.

Jeremy's eyes snapped open, making him wince from the brightness of the sun. He was getting sentimental. He needed another drink. To make him less

sentimental, of course. With one more glance at the lake, he headed back to the cabin.

* * * * *

Jeremy took another swig of gin, having drunk all the whiskey. And the vodka.

He should have bought that bottle of rum at the last liquor store.

A fire played at his feet, the only source of light, and he stared into the flames. It was surprising how well-kept the old cabin was considering it hadn't been used in years. At one time it was a favored retreat, but years had left the place abandoned and forgotten. It had been so forgotten that he didn't even think to come here when he started his quest. No, "quest" made it sound like he was doing something heroic. There was nothing brave about Jeremy Marsden.

It was odd being able to think. To be alone with his thoughts. The quiet was unnerving. He missed the intrusion in a sick sort of way. Or maybe he just missed *her*.

Jeremy stood shakily and walked around the room. He needed a distraction. There were dusty knick-knacks everywhere. Kate had been a pack-rat, and the cabin was the one place she was allowed to hoard her clutter. He stopped to examine a shelf which looked more like a shrine. A statue of a crucified Jesus dominated the center. Mosaic pictures of holy-looking people kept God's son company, as well as miniature figurines of assorted saints, martyrs, and angels. They wouldn't stop staring at him with those unblinking, painted-on eyes.

Jeremy gulped down more gin. He wasn't certain, but it looked like Jesus' frown grew deeper. Being Irish, Kate had been raised a staunch Catholic. Now that she was gone, he'd like to think he was embracing a part of her heritage. The drinking part.

He considered packing away all the creepy-looking figurines before they came to life and tried to exorcise him in his sleep. But that wasn't going to get him on God's "good" list. Jeremy laughed so hard at that thought he stumbled to the floor. God wasn't Santa.

He wished he was though. Santa looked a hell of a lot more jolly and forgiving than Jesus did on that cross. And Jeremy was going to need a lot of forgiveness for what he had planned.

It wasn't exactly suicide. But it was close enough.

However, of all Kate's preachings, one thing stood out. One concept he could never wrap his head around because it was so ludicrous. But in the end it was going to save him. *Eternal sin*. The only sin that isn't forgivable is believing that something *is* unforgivable. You can only suffer from eternal sin and never reach heaven by believing you can't. And dammit, Jeremy was selfish enough to believe that even *he* could reach heaven. He had to. He was going to cheat God. He was going to find a way to heaven knowing he didn't deserve to be there. That was why he was here. To find the closest thing to heaven—heaven on earth, as Kate always called it—because he needed all the help he could get.

Jeremy fingered the gold cross around his neck. It once belonged to Kate. He was a walking hypocrite, he knew, but he was a hypocrite who was going to find his peace one way or another. He took another drink.

* * * * *

Jeremy awoke to the sun glaring in his eyes. He was swaying again. He'd been so unsteady on his feet lately that he should have been used to it. Now he was even doing it in his sleep. On his feet. A lot of things didn't make sense here, but he was too tired to try to work them out.

He realized he was lying down when a bird flew directly overhead. And he noticed the clouds. Oh good, this time it wasn't him. The world was swaying. Or rather, rocking. Back and forth. Back and forth. It might have been soothing if it wasn't making him nauseated. He bolted upright, groaning as his head split in two. He had just enough time to turn to the side before he emptied the contents of his stomach. Jeremy frowned. What the hell had he eaten that was pink?

But more importantly, how had he managed to get in a rowboat? He was in the middle of the lake without a paddle. However, he still had an unopened bottle of scotch. He congratulated himself for that much.

The first swig burned his throat and caused such extreme pain that he threw up the rest of his stomach overboard. He was still staring at the frothy chunks desecrating the pristine water when an all too familiar voice permeated the haze of his hang-over.

“That didn't look fun.”

Jeremy closed his eyes. He thought he'd escaped.

Slowly, he lifted his head. No matter how many times this happened, his breath still caught each time.

Perched elegantly on the opposite seat of the rowboat, her dark hair fell loose around her shoulders. This time, she was dressed all in white. Just like on their wedding day. His blood-shot eyes tried to focus on her, but his blurred vision—combined with the rocking of the boat—was making it difficult.

He studied her silently. And resisted the urge to tuck a stray strand of hair that blew into her eyes

“You don’t seem surprised to see me.”

Any minute now she was going to disappear. He had given up trying to beg or will her to stay. Night after night, she’d appear. At one point, she stayed long enough to make him believe she’d never been gone. But just as he was about to reach out and touch her, she shot him a mocking sneer and disappeared.

He had begun to think of her as his tormentor. And his guilt only intensified.

Jeremy had to force himself to look at the lake, at the trees—anywhere but her. But she was just as impatient as she had been in real life.

“Well, I’m surprised to see you. It’s taken you a while.” She spied the bottle in his hand. Realization dawned in her widened eyes. Eyes which had never before looked so intense. Maybe his imagination was getting better. He knew that sometimes when people lost one of their senses like sight, the other senses became keener. Maybe since *all* of his senses were dulling, his imagination was picking up the slack.

He eyed the bottle of scotch in his hand. It was old. He'd found it in one of the cupboards in the cabin after the gin had run out. Yes, it was probably just the scotch.

"I'm glad you came." She smiled, making his stomach do weird flips—and not from the alcohol.

He'd reached a new low.

"You're just in my head."

She scoffed. He had to admit, it was a very realistic scoff. The past apparitions were hazy, had only come at night when he was at his worst. They spoke, yes—mocked him, blamed him, egged him on—but never with such clarity. But she was here. In broad daylight, looking soft and ethereal but more real than all his other dreams had been. It was torture.

"Just please. Go away."

That apparently did it. She stood suddenly, and he couldn't tell if the boat actually rocked or if it was just the natural movement from the water.

"You go away."

If he was going to conjure up these images of her, he damn well should be able to control them.

"Sit." He tried using a tone of authority, much like one would use on puppy.

Unfortunately, she did not sit down obediently. Seemed to be even more enraged. Kate had always had a short temper too.

The next thing he knew, the boat was suddenly flipped over, and he was pitched into the lake.

Holy Mother of God, it's cold!

Jeremy struggled to the surface, treading water as his head darted left and right. Nessie was going eat him. He was sure of it.

But when his eyes finally lighted on the capsized boat, floating a few feet away, he might as well have seen Nessie for all the shock it gave him.

She was standing gracefully atop the overturned boat, not a hair out of place, completely dry. He considered his options. Land was a good distance away, but he wasn't so sure he wanted to go back towards his vengeful apparition.

"I'm not an apparition!" she called out. Anger still tinged her voice.

Jeremy swam back to the boat, tired of treading water. What the hell. If she wanted to talk, then he'd oblige her. And if she wanted to be categorized as something other than a figment of his imagination, then far be it for him to deny her. He hauled himself onto the overturned boat and slumped next to her, tired and numb.

"Ghost?"

She glared at him. "Too morbid."

"Then what? You're too bitchy to be an angel."

From the evil glare he received, Jeremy was surprised he wasn't pitched back into the water. She forced a patient smile—the epitome of serenity and grace. Considering she was still mad as hell, it looked more like she was baring her teeth.

“Shut-up, Jeremy. I’m having a bad day.”

He decided to humor her, even though he was essentially talking to an imaginary friend.

“What are you doing here then?”

“Where else would I be?” Her arch look had him surveying his surroundings dubiously.

“*This* is heaven?”

Her tone was condescending. “Isn’t that what you thought the first time we were here?”

This was crazy. Even for him. “I either drank too much or haven’t drunk enough,” Jeremy mumbled.

“You haven’t drunk enough yet,” she said.

He sighed. He shouldn’t be surprised. After all, did he really expect to get stuck with a normal angel? One who was gentle, and patient, and calm—guiding lost souls to the light?

No. His angel was an enabler.

* * * * *

They were lying on the embankment watching the sun set. Two lovers on a romantic date. Only one of them was dead.

The angel had told him there was a bottle of wine in the cellar, and he managed to find a glass. Now that he had company, he might as well try to be polite. Manners for a figment of his imagination. His mother would have been so proud.

But he wasn't going to dwell on the inner workings of his mind. He only had one more day. Not even. Hours.

"You're not going to tell me to stop?"

She shook her head.

"Not going to tell me I have more to live for? That I'll find happiness again?"

There was an emphatic shaking of her head that time, and Jeremy felt like laughing. He was insane, certifiable for sure, but at least he was able to conjure up an honest angel. She was just as selfish as him, just as selfish as Kate had been. The thought comforted him.

The angel had the grace to look somewhat ashamed. She was quiet for a while.

"You don't have anything else to live for. Or *anyone* for that matter."

He laughed. She'd always been so damn blunt.

Her hands found their way to her hips. "Or at least you'd *better* not."

"Jealousy? From an angel?"

"I died, Jeremy. I didn't get a lobotomy. You're still mine and mine alone." She looked down pointedly. "And so is Jeremy Junior."

He smiled. Jeremy had never minded her possessiveness.

"I guess it's a good thing we could never have kids," she added.

He saw the reproach in her eyes before she could look away. His smile disappeared. Half the time she didn't even mean to hurt him. But the other half he

knew she deliberately baited him. He wasn't sure which it was this time. Didn't care. Apparently, this argument hadn't died with her.

“If we'd had kids, that would be enough reason to live, and then *you'd* be the one alone,” Jeremy said, standing up so quickly he fell over. He cursed, blaming himself and the figment of his imagination or angel or whatever she was. Hell, even blaming it on the damned grass.

“No, no. That's not what I meant.” The angel gave him her most placating smile. It was the same one Kate had always used whenever she'd maxed out her credit card. The angel re-filled his glass, still two-thirds of the way full.

He regretted his anger and sat back down.

“It's beautiful here,” he said, trying to make conversation. It seemed easier to do.

“It's lonely,” she snapped back, blue eyes flashing, forgetting her remorse just moments ago.

Jeremy sighed. The likeness was so very real. He had not missed the selfish petulance and accusations, but then, they had been so uniquely her. The temptation to reach out and know for sure was overwhelming. Then again, he might not be able to feel her but that didn't necessarily mean she was just once again a figment of his imagination. Maybe one couldn't touch an angel. He took another drink.

“It's your fault.”

Jeremy closed his eyes against the words that had been repeated through his head so many times. He wasn't even sure if it was she who spoke or he was hearing it in his head. Or if it was both.

He took blame where it was due. And maybe even where it wasn't.

"I know." Jeremy took another drink. And another.

"I forgive you though," she allowed. She was an angel after all.

He remained silent, the haunted look never leaving his eyes.

"I didn't mean it," she was finally forced to say.

Jeremy knew when she was lying.

"I just missed you. So much." That at least was the truth. "We'd never been apart for longer than a few days since we were kids. It was just...hard. Especially being here."

He nodded. Loneliness he could understand very well. His hand started to reach out, but he stopped himself before he got too close. She still hadn't disappeared and damned if he was going to lose her now. He could see her, he could hear her, and that had to be good enough. For now.

The hand that sought hers instead lifted the glass to his lips.

* * * * *

By dawn, he was more than ready. Light was just starting to stream in through the windows. It was going to be a beautiful day. Just as it had been a year ago. Jeremy lay slumped against the door frame, bottle clasped firmly in his hand. He had collapsed there after being unable to open the door in an attempt to get to the lake.

“Oh, Jeremy.” It was an anguished whisper.

“Kate?”

He struggled to get up.

“Kate? Where are you? Kate!” he bellowed incoherently. “I need you!”

He started to cry. Not even silent trickles but huge, wracking sobs.

“Kate!”

The angel kneeled down beside him. “Just one more drink, baby, and then...”

Jeremy downed the rest of the bottle. His heart was slowing. In the last vestiges of his working mind, he knew.

“Kate?”

His arms reached out, grasping at the air. He became desperate. “Kate!”

It was becoming harder just to suck air into his lungs. His body was starting to realize it was past the point of needing oxygen.

Her face appeared. Fading in and out, the image dotted with stars and spots that were fast taking over his vision.

With one last burst of energy, Jeremy reached for her hand.

*

Once Upon a Time

For every girl who's wanted a happily ever after.

“...to love, honor, and obey as long as you both shall live?”

The priest's words reverberate in my head. I finally notice just how silent it is. Even the woodland creatures have stopped their excited chatter and singsong. My head is starting to pound. It feels heavy.

I only now remember there is a solid gold crown weighing down my neck.

Everything had sounded good up until that last part. Or maybe it's just because I haven't been paying attention. My mind rebels at the word “obey,” and I find my tongue unable to move. I risk a quick glance upwards and realize I haven't even been looking my beloved in the eye throughout the entire ceremony. He stares down at me expectantly. My Prince Charming. It's a cliché, but I can't help feeling like I'm drowning in those emerald eyes of his. His blonde hair is slicked back debonairly, and the military uniform fits his lean body like a second skin.

God, he's so handsome. So noble. So perfect. The smile he flashes is encouraging, full of even white teeth. *You look beautiful*, he quietly mouths to me. My heart melts.

He is too good to me. Never mind the fact that *of course* I look beautiful. An army of maids had been styling and primping, tweaking and poking at me for the past four hours. I'm their masterpiece. My light hazel eyes are shown off to perfection with the help of a pound of make-up. My chestnut hair is sleek and shiny, every curl in place for once. And how could anyone look less than beautiful in a dress that probably cost a small kingdom to make?

I take a deep breath. I *know* this is the right thing to do. I'm just feeling typical wedding day jitters. The priest clears his throat again. Apparently, patience is too much to ask of a man of the cloth.

Just as my lips are beginning to open to form around the "I," the church doors slam open, and an ear-curdling scream slices through the air. Every head including mine spins around shocked at the unexpected disturbance. A collective gasp is heard.

The fact that she is obviously out of breath and slightly disheveled does not detract from the sheer beauty of the woman standing in the doorway. Long golden hair cascades down her slender back, and even from afar, the exquisite planes of her face stand out. She begins marching towards us down the aisle, and I notice my intended take a step back. I glance at him suspiciously then back at the woman who upon closer inspection looks like she's about to breathe fire. By now the whole church is buzzing with excited murmurs, and the priest appears to be having heart palpitations.

My eyes narrow. This woman, this ridiculously gorgeous woman, is ruining my wedding day. I briefly wonder if I have something to worry about then mentally laugh the thought away. What do I have to worry about from someone who defines perfection? It's more likely that pigs will fly than for Prince Charming to have done any sort of wrong.

"You unfaithful, lying son of a bitch!"

Prince Charming raises his arms as if trying to fend off the menacing woman coming closer and closer with murder in her brilliant blue eyes.

“Now, now Darling, let me explain.”

Hm. Somewhere, a pig just got wings.

“*Darling?*” I spit the word out.

Prince Charming’s eyes lock with mine. He looks terrified, but more so now that he sees the murderous intent that is starting to form in *my* eyes.

“Cindy, Sweetheart—,” his voice is gently placating. But he still has the beautiful, homicidal maniac to contend with. He gracefully jumps behind the altar in an effort to avoid her perfectly manicured claws.

“*Sweetheart?*” Her echo sounds just as angry and incredulous as mine had been. With an unholy, inhuman growl she launches herself at him.

A surge of possessiveness jolts through me, and I grab her arm before she can rake his eyes out. If anyone is going to kill *my* fiancé, it will damn well be *me*.

The golden-haired goddess yanks her arm back and bares her teeth.

“Who are you?”

My white dress and the fact that we’re standing in a full church apparently weren’t enough of a give-away.

“I’m about to be his *wife*,” I say slowly as though speaking to a dim-witted child. “Who the hell are you?”

The woman looks taken aback at the venom in my voice. What did she expect, roses and sunshine? “I’m his *girlfriend*,” she returns haughtily, as if though that has more import than being someone’s actual wife.

Prince Charming had been quietly trying to shrink away unnoticed. So much for heroic bravery. I spear him with a glare, effectively freezing him in place. “What is going on here? Do you know her?”

He looks scared. “Um...no?”

I’m not an idiot. Honesty just joined loyalty, bravery and honor out the window.

The blonde starts shrieking again and he takes a healthy step back, quickly clearing his throat. “Oh, um, yes I do. I guess.”

“Who is she?” I demand, desperately trying to retain my patience.

“This is Sleeping Beauty.” He turns towards her with a hesitant smile and gestures towards me. “And this is Cinderella.”

There is a long silence as we both stare at each other. What does he want me to do, shake her hand?

“We um...had a thing.”

A thing? Unbelievable.

“But it was a long time ago,” he’s quick to reassure me.

The incredulous look on her beautiful face is almost comical. “It was two weeks ago!” she manages to get out before she’s off and chasing him around the altar.

My headache has turned into a migraine. I whip off the stupid crown and massage my temples, trying to take this all in. By now the invited guests have moved from dumb stupefaction to pandemonium. The king and queen are arguing heatedly, every now and then pointing accusingly towards their precious only

child. In the midst of it all, I'm not quite sure what to do. Anger mixes with disbelief, with a whole lot of hurt and disappointment thrown in. Really, was it too much to ask that he be perfect?

I notice that Sleeping Beauty has picked up one of the decorative candlesticks and is now brandishing it about like a weapon. I can't help but be concerned when she comes perilously close to lopping off his ear. Maybe there is an explanation for all this. For her. It doesn't seem fair to automatically doubt him just because of this one crazy woman. After all, Prince Charming saved me. I had nothing before I met him. But now I could have it all. The crown, the castle, the 2.5 perfect children. And most importantly, the *happily ever after*.

I take a determined breath. Nothing is going to stop me from having my happily ever after with Prince Charming. I step forward to halt Sleeping Beauty's attack, swooping down to save my beloved.

"There you are, Princey. I've been looking all over for you," a soft, breathy voice stops me in my tracks. I turn and find myself faced with yet another woman. Her skin is impossibly pale, a stark contrast against her curly, ebony hair. Eyes of the same color have widened with distress at the scene before her. Like Sleeping, she is enchantingly beautiful. My mind partially gets over the shock enough to remember her uttered endearment. *Princey?*

My eyes light on the other candlestick, and suddenly, Sleeping's idea doesn't seem all that bad.

"Snowy?" The Prince comes to an abrupt halt as soon as he spots the new arrival. His mouth is hanging open and he looks about ready to faint.

Unfortunately—or rather *fortunately*, considering my current state of fury—he doesn't have to. His momentary pause has allowed Sleeping Beauty a chance to catch up. Before anyone can even blink, she emits an Amazon warrior-like cry and clubs him on the back of his head. The resounding thud of skull hitting floor echoes throughout the now silent church.

This new woman lets out a horrified squeak and rushes to his side. Though I've never seen her before, I know who she is. Even *I* have heard the rumors. Everyone in the kingdom has. But everyone thought it was just that. A *rumor*. Even if there was someone stupid enough to need a kiss from a charming prince as an alarm clock, it didn't mean that it was *my* Prince Charming. But here she is now. Snow White herself, in the flesh. In the very, very pale flesh.

“Let's kill him!” a gruff, deep voice cuts through my musings.

Oh shit. She's brought the dwarves. All seven of them look menacing, even Happy. The King and Queen make their way up to the altar, staring down at their now unconscious son and eyeing the dwarves and Sleeping Beauty warily. I am too, for that matter. Sleeping Beauty has still not put down that candlestick.

“This is just dreadful,” the Queen moans.

“I thought he took care of all this beforehand,” says the King.

I round on them. “What exactly is *all this*? What is going on?”

“That's what I want to know,” Sleeping adds huffily.

“We're supposed to be getting married,” Snow White wails, throwing herself over Prince Charming's prostrate body. “You've killed him! He's dead! Dead, dead, dead!”

“Shut-up. He’s not dead. Yet.” That murderous look in Sleeping’s eyes is back again, leading me to believe she’s not one to balk at kicking a man while he’s down.

I can only roll my eyes at Snow’s hysterics and Sleeping’s blood-thirst.

“I want some answers first,” I interject, desperately trying to control my temper.

All three of us peer down at him. He looks even more good-looking unconscious, damn him.

“How do we wake h—,” Before Snow can finish her sentence, I grab one of vases holding floral arrangements and throw the water in Prince Charming’s perfect face. He comes up sputtering.

“Hello, *Sweetheart*.” I give him a shark’s smile.

“*Darling*.”

“*Princey*.”

He looks like he’d much rather be unconscious right now than have to face three gorgeous, furious women.

“I want to know what’s going on right now,” I hiss down at him.

“Cindy...I can explain.”

When he receives three expectant looks, he becomes uncomfortable.

“Might I have a word with you in private?”

“Hell no!” Sleeping jumps in. “I want an explanation too.”

Prince Charming expels a weary sigh and sits up. “Look, I just want to start off by letting you know that I think you’re all exceptional women.”

I roll my eyes. Sleeping shoots him a suspicious glare. Snow beams at him rapturously like he's just announced it's Christmas.

“You know, a man has to sow his wild oats. I was doing just that on my tour abroad. Getting to know the land, mixing with the common folk, slaying dragons—,”

“Saving damsels in distress?”

“Exactly,” he shoots me a grateful look, oblivious to my sarcasm. “I met you all at different times. I found Snow White first. She was just so beautiful and vulnerable, lying there in that glass coffin.”

Yes. The first thing *I* think of when I see a dead person is, *how beautiful*.

“...But while she was wrapping things up with the dwarves, I kind of stumbled upon Sleeping Beauty...”

His tender gaze actually makes her features soften. “She too was just so beautiful lying there. I couldn't just leave her under that spell for another hundred years, could I?”

Everyone, seeming to be under *his* spell, can only nod at his gentle words of love and bravery.

“So does this mean I'm just the latest one in line?” This time he doesn't miss the acid dripping from my voice.

He turns those warm, green eyes towards me, and try as I might I can't help but sigh. “No, I raced home to tell my parents about my good fortune abroad, but then that night with you...it was *magical*. We only had one dance, but I knew.

I went crazy trying to find you, Cindy. And when I did, I couldn't very well just leave you with your evil step-mother and sisters, could I?"

The reminder that he'd saved me from their clutches manages to take away some of my ire.

"Well, what do we do now?"

"You can only marry one of us," Sleeping Beauty reminds him. There is an unmistakable threat in her words.

"Well I don't really kn—,"

"You met me first!" Snow butts in with that breathy voice. "I'm number one."

My hackles immediately rise, and the possessive side of my nature I hadn't even known existed until today resurfaces. "Well I'm the newest one!"

I can't help wincing. Really, can I objectify myself even more?

"Well *I* am the best kisser!"

I turn towards Sleeping Beauty incredulous. How does that even signify? She wasn't even *conscious* for her first kiss!

"You've been asleep for a hundred years, you old hag. How would you know the first thing about kissing?"

She takes a step towards me, but I'm not backing down.

"Well, I can cook and clean for you, Princey. And take care of you. I'll make you the best wife ever."

I'm disgusted by the plaintive note in Snow's voice, but can't help thinking in my head that I can probably cook and clean better than her. After all, I

was practically a servant since the age of twelve. What does *Princess* Snow White know about taking care of someone? Look at those dwarves. She could have at least bathed a few of them before coming here.

“You have to pick one of us, Prince Charming.” He looks scared at Sleeping’s ultimatum. “And for your sake, I hope you choose wisely. You know that I can give you everything you ever wanted.”

“Excuse me?” I can’t help it. To hell with that candlestick still in her hand. I shove her. “Today is *my* wedding. There is no decision to be made. Sorry, sister. He met *me*, liked *me* better and is marrying *me*. Today. *I* can give him *more* than everything he ever needs and wants.”

“Woodland creatures love me. It’s always a sign of true good nature if animals like you.”

I really want to hit Snow White right now.

“Well I can—,”

“I’m sure I’m better than them at—,”

“I will do everything for you that—,”

We are screaming at each other. Here in the middle of the church, we are yelling about how much better at cooking, cleaning, sewing, singing, dancing, kissing, and berry-picking we are than one another. It’s about to get violent.

“Prince Charming, just pick one of them!” His mother begs.

“Ladies, ladies.” I notice that Prince Charming is actually smiling now.

“There can be only one way to resolve this dilemma.”

He pauses for suspense. He better say that these two bitches can get out of the church so we can resume our wedding. *That* is the only way that I can think of to resolve this dilemma.

“We have a contest. The winner gets me.”

My jaw actually drops.

“What?!” All three of us are staring at him like he’s gone mad.

“You want us to *compete* for you?” I demand.

“It’s the fairest way, I think. Three rounds, with a point system. Testing all of these virtues you ladies keep bragging about. The one with the most points at the end wins me and gets to be Mrs. Prince Charming.” He smiles satisfied.

Somehow I manage to bite out, “There is no way I’m competing—,”

“I’m in!”

I stare at Sleeping incredulously. Where is all of her self-righteous anger? Where is the “hell no, you worm” that I was expecting to be the first thing out of her mouth?

She shoots me a superior look. “What, afraid you’ll lose? I know what I’ve got. Bring it on.”

Snow chews on her bottom lip worriedly. “If this is the only way that I can show you we are meant to be together forever and to prove my love to you, then I’ll do it.” I can’t help but notice that half the dwarves roll their eyes. The other half looks like they still want to kill Prince Charming.

I turn on him. “I can’t believe this. Just yesterday you were telling me that you *knew* I was the one for you. And now you want me to prove it to you?” I can’t

hold back the hurt in my voice. Every hope and dream that started forming when I'd met him is disappearing before my eyes. I was nervous about this wedding, but now I'm terrified. Because if there is no wedding my entire life is up in the air. Nowhere to go. No one to turn to.

“Now, Cindy.” He takes my hands in his, momentarily turning his back on the others. “I just want to be sure that I pick the best one. You know I love you. I want to give you everything. But I just want to be sure you can give me everything too. Just do this for me. Please? It's the only way.” He smiles that melting smile of his. And then he winks at me. Winks! Like he has something up his sleeve, which makes me feel marginally better.

I almost think I've imagined it, because then right away he turns back to everyone else.

“It will be a three day competition, testing two skills each day. There will be three impartial judges, and they'll give you all points. Ten points for each skill. At the end of the competition, the points will be tallied out of 60, and we will have our winner. How does that sound?”

The two of them nod, but I'm still not sure. I know I want him. I know I'm good enough. Dammit. My whole life I've been trying to prove that I'm good enough, that I'm better. But I never thought I'd have to do it with Prince Charming.

“I don't think Cinderella really wants this. I don't think she has what it takes.” Sleeping's taunting voice grates on my nerves.

If winning this competition will get me my happily ever after and prove that I'm the best, then so be it. I *will* be happy. I *will* be with my Prince Charming in the end.

"I'm in."

* * * * *

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Already tomorrow is the first test—that of Beauty and Grace. How we will be tested, I do not know. Why we need to be tested on something so shallow, I do not know. But I have decided to go through with this, and so I will take whatever they throw at me.

I should be getting a good night's sleep, but I'm nervous. I need a morale booster. I need support. Snow White has her seven dwarves. Sleeping Beauty has brought in her three fairy godmothers. I sucked it up and called my own fairy godmother. I figure one is at least better than none. That is, if she actually comes.

I'm pacing my lavish tent when she poofs in close to midnight. She's dressed in extravagant silver robes, and her short white hair is swept back.

"Darling!" She greets me with two air kisses on each cheek. "You poor dear. I heard about what happened at the wedding. So sorry I wasn't there. I was needed in the Black Forest. But I guess I didn't miss anything anyway!" Her tinkling laugh doesn't soothe my nerves. "Charming has always been such a naughty little boy."

I'm immediately suspicious. "Did you know about Snow White and Sleeping Beauty before you set me up with him?"

“Well, whatever do you mean?” She flits around the tent, examining the silk draperies and fur rugs. I glare at her.

“Don’t play coy with me, Fairy Godmother. Did you, or did you not know that he was already presently involved with not one, but *two* other women?”

She shrugs daintily. “I might have heard something...”

I want to rip her little wings out. “Then why the hell did you push me on him?”

“Don’t take that tone of voice with me, Missy,” she snaps. “Look at this!” She gestures at the opulent surroundings that make the tent look more like an actual room. “This is twenty times the size of that little pallet by the fireplace you had. You wanted to go to the ball. You wanted to fall in love. You never specified what kind of man he had to be. And stop acting like I found an ogre for you. He’s a prince for goodness sakes. A very handsome one too. And he has a palace. What more could you ask for?”

“Honesty?” My reply is sarcastic, but I can’t help it. Anyone would be hurt by what I had to find out today. The tears that I had been holding back finally break through, and I collapse on the brocade chaise lounge. “He made me believe he was perfect. He made me believe that I was the only woman in the world for him.”

Fairy Godmother snorts. “His name is Prince *Charming*, not Prince *Perfect*.” But she sits down and gives me a comforting pat on the arm.

“Darling, you have to realize that he has faults too. He’s human, just like you. So he made a mistake. The point is that he can make you happy. He can give you everything. But if that’s not good enough...”

She trails off. I feel ungrateful, guilty, and selfish. She’s right.

“I should probably get to sleep. I have a competition to win tomorrow.” I give her a small smile.

“That’s my girl. It’s the Beauty and Grace portion of the competition too. Tsk. The judges will be horrified by those puffy eyes. Dry your tears. I’ll make you a special potion that will put you right to sleep. Tomorrow you’ll be one step closer to your happily ever after.”

* * * * *

The Beauty and Grace challenge this morning is in two parts. The first requires each “contestant” to model a ball gown in front of the panel of judges. We will be judged on how beautiful we look, our bearing, and curtsies. The second part is how well we can dance in a ball gown and high heels while still maintaining our poise and gracefulness.

I’m more than a little nervous, seeing as how this is the competition I’m not as prepared for. Being raised a servant I wasn’t given elaborate instructions and practice on etiquette. That night I danced with Prince Charming, it was just natural. I was floating from the magic of it.

At least I know I look good in my gown. My fairy godmother concocted a beautiful creation of green silk and gold lace that brings out my eyes. Plus, green is the prince’s favorite color. And at least this time, my heels aren’t made of glass.

I really think Fairy Godmother was on something when she made me those. Stilettos hurt enough as it is, but ones made out of glass? She had to have been high.

“Ahhhhhhh!” A piercing scream sends me stumbling out of my tent, before I can pin up my last lock of hair.

The three contestants’ tents have been secluded together, and I practically collide with Sleeping Beauty. Another wail directs us to the tent of Snow White. She’s standing in front of her vanity almost in tears.

“What’s wrong?” I have to ask. I might not like her, but it’s not as if I want her dead.

Though if she *had* stayed dead in her stupid glass coffin it would be one less woman to contend with.

“I-I have a pimple!” She is actually crying.

Sleeping snickers. “Well, that’s just too bad. Maybe the judges won’t notice.” Snow White looks hopeful. “Then again, they’d have to be the three blind mice not to notice.” With that catty remark and another cackle, she waltzes out of the tent.

I turn to leave too. Really what could I possibly do? But Snow White’s tears sort of get to me. “Listen, it will be okay,” I say, coming to kneel by her vanity. “Just cover it up.”

“Look at me!” Snow turns her head.

Oh wow. It’s huge. And on her nose. The three blind mice probably *could* see it.

“I’m done for! Done for! Now I’ll never get the Prince.”

I wince. Damn right she’s not getting him. But she continues to sob pathetically. She’s still beautiful though. In all honesty, probably a hair prettier than Sleeping and me. I should be counting my blessings and rejoicing in her small misfortune, only it seems like she truly thinks her life is over. Because of a pimple.

“This Beauty and Grace part isn’t that important. I mean, there are still two other events.”

“Th-this is the m-most important event!” she wails.

I fail to see how this is the most important event but don’t bother arguing.

“Who w-wants an ugly wife? Princey fell in love with my because of my beauty. N-now I have nothing. I’m-I’m ugly! And fat.”

I roll my eyes. I’d wager this woman weighs one-fourth of one of those dwarves. “I ate too many grapes yesterday,” she confides in a whisper.

I can’t take this. I really can’t. Anger surges through me at what we are being forced to put ourselves through.

“You need to stop crying,” I say sternly. “You’re making it worse. We’ll just put a little cream on it and some ice to reduce the swelling. And you don’t have *nothing*. You can still have your pride.”

She looks at me as if though the word “pride” is foreign. I sigh. I deserve a sainthood for what I’m about to do.

“You are beautiful, Snow White. Pimple and all. No matter what anyone else thinks—the judges, even the prince—you are beautiful. You just have to

believe it.” My eyes meet hers in the mirror. I force all the insecurities I’ve ever had out of my head and tell myself the same thing.

“Now get your game face on. I’ll ring for some ice.”

* * * * *

I’m fairly confident I held my own today in the competition. I’m not as graceful as Sleeping Beauty and not as slender as Snow White. But when I walked out on that podium in front of the judges and in front of half the kingdom—yes, they opened it up to spectators—I just strutted my stuff. Call me a hypocrite after what I said to Snow, but it did help to see the Prince’s eyes light up as soon as I came out. Luckily, *he* was the dance partner we were to be judged with, and his encouraging smile was all I needed to start waltzing on air.

At the end of the day, Sleeping took home a perfect 20 points. Snow White again started crying when she was given a 17. They actually deducted three points on looks. Probably for the damn pimple. I was a point off on both curtsying and posture of all things. But since I expected to be way behind the other two women after today, I was happy with the score of 18.

What made me even happier was when Prince Charming pulled me aside at the end and explained to me that he really wanted me to win. And that he only suggested the competition to prevent Snow and Sleeping from freaking out and declaring war. He just felt that this was the best way for everyone to think they had an equal shot, when really he knew I am going to win hands down. A part of me is still angry at him, of course. But it’s hard to hold a grudge when he sounds so sincere and so...well, charming. He wants to marry me over the other women

who are *princesses*. He loves me in spite of everything. What more could a girl ask for?

* * * * *

“I hate deer.”

Fairy Godmother smiles. “Maybe that’s why they didn’t listen to you.”

“If I lose this competition because of a damn deer, I swear I’m eating venison for the rest of my life,” I grumble, beginning to pace the expanse of my tent.

She tsks. “You are not losing.”

“I’m in last place,” I remind her.

It had been the Talent and Virtues portion of the competition today. The first part was singing and the second part was taming woodland creatures. Apparently, these are necessary in a wife. Sleeping was almost perfect with the singing, but wasn’t too great with the animals. The judges took off three points because she couldn’t get any of the birds to perch on her finger. She got 16 points putting her in second place with a total of 36. Snow took the lead with a perfect 20—she wasn’t kidding when she said woodland creatures loved her—and a total of 37. I got all 10 points for singing, but don’t really have experience with deer. I couldn’t make the stupid animal frolic with me. So I only got 5 points for taming woodland creatures, leaving me in last place with 33 points.

“You are not losing,” she repeats. “We didn’t come this far for you to lose. Besides, tomorrow is what you’ve been waiting for. The Housewifely Skills portion of the competition is yours in the bag. You’ve been cleaning and cooking

for that step-family of yours for years and now it's what will win you a crown. Especially with that secret chocolate cake recipe of yours. That will blow the judges away. And the Prince, he'll never want to look at another woman after he tries that cake of yours."

Instead of buoying my spirits, the thought depresses me. Is that really how I'm going to keep my husband from straying? With a cake? The ridiculousness of it stops me in my tracks.

But Fairy Godmother is oblivious to my inner musings and prattles on. "I heard the other fairies saying that Sleeping Beauty can't really cook worth her salt. And wherever would she have learned to clean something? And just look at those dwarves. If they aren't proof enough of Snow White's slovenliness then I don't know what is. If you get a perfect score, and if the both of them get even just a few points off, then you will definitely win the prince. Then again, just to be sure, maybe you ought to practice sweeping."

Her suggestion makes me laugh aloud. "Practice sweeping?"

"Well it's been a few days, a week even, since you've last swept. You might have gotten rusty."

I'm so incredulous all I can do is repeat her last words. "Gotten rusty?"

"I know that sweeping and mopping and dusting will be included in tomorrow's competition, and you can't take your skill for granted."

"Take my *skill* for granted?" Maybe she's high again.

She tsks and actually conjures up a broom from thin air. “For goodness sakes, Cinderella, you are not a parrot. You’ve been spoiled by the prince this past week that you’ve known him. One must always practice one’s skills.”

“I’m not practicing sweeping,” I tell her in a deadly quiet voice.

She glares at me. “Stubborn child. Do you all of a sudden think you’re too good for this? Don’t forget where I found you, mucking about in the dirt, practically a slave. You *need* this. You *need* him. Do you understand what’s at stake?”

She smiles evilly at me, making me feel sick to my stomach. She knows I don’t want to hear this.

“You won’t even be able to go back to being a slave. You’ll be worse off than a slave, because you’ll be alone.”

In that moment, I hate her. I hate the damn broom in her hand. I hate Snow White and Sleeping Beauty for being so perfect and ahead, and for stealing my Prince Charming. I hate Prince Charming for breaking my heart. I hate that my happily ever after was snatched from me when I was so close. I hate this competition. I hate the fact that I have to prove that I’m worthy yet again. But mostly, I hate myself. Because I know that tomorrow, I’m going to do whatever it takes, lose whatever pride I have left, in order to fight for my happiness. Only it doesn’t seem like fighting.

I don’t know what it feels like, but it’s not something as honorable as fighting.

* * * * *

“I knew you’d blow them away!” Fairy Godmother is ecstatic and I’m not sure why. I’m gathering my ingredients for the final part of the competition—cooking.

She takes me aside conspiratorially, looking left and right like a fugitive. “I know no one is supposed to know the scores for this round till the very end, but I have an in with one of the judges.”

I really shouldn’t be surprised. *God* is what should be stressed in her name.

“You got a perfect score on the last challenge!”

My smile is bittersweet. Apparently, even without the practice, I’m handy with a broom.

“And not only that, but the other two did terribly this round. Sleeping Beauty refused to clean cobwebs in the first part, then undercooked her soufflé. And the judges found Snow White’s apple pie too mushy just now. You need a perfect score again with your chocolate cake to win this competition by one point! And we all know how good your cake is, so I just wanted to be the first to congratulate you, *Princess Cinderella*.”

It’s getting hard to breathe, I’m so shocked. What she just said is starting to sink in.

“You mean I’m going to win?”

“Yes! Yes, yes, yes! You win the Prince. You are better than those other two husband-stealing trollops! You are the best.”

She starts dancing around with glee. “I cannot wait to gloat to all my friends.” She finally notices the ingredients in my hands. “Oh, but don’t let me interrupt you. I don’t want to get in the way of your genius. Just be sure to save me a piece, darling.”

With a poof she’s gone.

I’m still standing there in a daze when Prince Charming comes into my tent, looking perfect and excited.

“It’s almost time, Cindy.” He kisses me softly, and though my heart picks up a beat it’s not as fast or as blinding as normal. “I just wanted to wish you good-luck.”

“What if I don’t win today?”

He’s immediately concerned and cups my face in his hands, comfortingly. “Hey now, don’t think like that. You will win, *Darling*.”

I’m *Sweetheart*.

I step away from him, still wanting an answer. “Yes, but what if I don’t?”

He looks vaguely annoyed by my persistence. “Then I shall be quite upset.”

“Upset?”

He tries again. “Devastated?”

I hate that it’s a question. If I lose today, he ends up getting a beautiful princess anyway. Maybe one who doesn’t cook as well as me, but who’s better at singing. Or curtsying in a ball gown.

The question tumbles out before I know what I'm saying. "Do you love me?"

"You know I do."

"Then let's leave this competition and elope somewhere." I'm practically begging him, but I don't care at this point. "Just the two of us, you have your horse. Let's ride into the sunset."

Prince Charming laughs. Actually laughs. "*Sweetheart*, what are you worried about? I've tried your cake, and I know it's fabulous. I could eat your chocolate cake for the rest of my life."

Yes, but if he knew that then why did he have to try the soufflé and the pie in the first place?

"If you want to pick me then just do it," I tell him. "Just pick me."

"But the competition—"

"To hell with the competition!" I burst out.

He shakes his head and gives me a sympathetic pat on the hand. "I think the stress is getting to you, Cindy. Just show everyone that your cake is the best, and then we will be together." He is talking to me like I'm a child. "It's that simple." A trumpet sounds outside signaling the start of the competition. "I have to go. You're up now. I'll see you out there. At the finish line. You're a winner, Cindy. Be sure to save me a piece of cake."

There's no poof, but he's gone just the same.

His words strengthen my resolve. I'm a winner. I'm going to win this.

* * * * *

2¼ cups of brown sugar, 3 eggs, and ½ cup of butter are mixed in with 3 ounces of melted chocolate. The 1 cup of milk and 1 cup of boiling water are waiting to be poured in. The 1½ teaspoon of vanilla, 2 teaspoons of baking soda and 2¼ cups of flour are all measured out. Now all I need is ½ teaspoon of salt.

My hand is shaking as I pour it.

I can see the judges taking copious notes, watching my every move. I have forty more minutes to get this done. In the stands the crowd is quiet for once. Prince Charming is silently cheering me on with those perfect smiles of his.

Smile, my fairy godmother urgently mouths to me when I happen to make eye contact. Apparently, the judges like *happy* bakers. I should probably even be whistling right now. Show them I can multi-task.

I start mixing the batter. It is dark and gooey, just the right consistency. I take a taste with my finger. Perfect. I know that this cake is probably going to be one of my best ones. I know that I am going to get a perfect score. I will have proven my worthiness, I will get my prince, and I will finally have my happily ever after.

The batter is done. All I have to do is pour it into the pan and stick it in the oven. And then thirty minutes later...

I don't even like chocolate cake. I like cheesecake.

But the Prince loves it. Especially my recipe. My secret recipe that he'll probably make me hand over to the palace chef or force me to make him chocolate cakes for the rest of his life.

Our lives.

Why didn't I make a cheesecake?

My hand picks up the salt.

But wait...

I already added it. I put it back down. I've come so far. I'm pretty enough. I'm graceful enough. I can sing good enough. And animals like me well enough. I can sweep good enough. And now, after I show everyone that I can bake well enough, it will finally prove that I am the best.

Like a show horse. A damn show horse. I had no choice being a slave before, but I actually helped make myself into a show horse now. The white stallion that Prince Charming has tethered off to the side—the one waiting to be ridden off into the sunset with the lucky winner—it didn't have to prove anything.

The judges and most of the crowd aren't paying attention since all that's left is to wait for the cake to bake. My hand surreptitiously reaches for the salt. It's not shaking anymore. I casually and quickly pour some into a cup. I look up. Charming is talking with his parents. My eyes lock with my fairy godmother's. They are bulging. She doesn't miss a thing. She is frantically shaking her head no. My hand lifts the cup.

What are you doing?! I see her mouth form the words, and for the first time in the past few days I finally have an answer.

I'm making my own happily ever after.

* * * * *

“And the winner, with precisely 51 points is...”

I take a deep breath.

“...Snow White!”

There is a massive uproar and cheering as everyone goes wild. A band starts playing a happy tune, while confetti and rice rains down. Next to me Snow is crying. With happiness this time, it's safe to assume. Sleeping is cursing and having what looks to be a temper tantrum.

I can't help but smile. Prince Charming leaps onto the stage and pauses in front of me. Our eyes meet for one brief second, but that's all I need. With a blink, he's off and hugging Snow White.

“How could you?!”

I step away, so I don't go deaf from Fairy Godmother's shrieks.

“You are the stupidest, most ungrateful, most conniving little—how could you?! Are you insane? Do you not realize that now you have absolutely nothing? Your step-mother won't take you back. After this little stunt, I'm washing my hands of an ingrate like you. You have no home, no money, no Prince Charming, no happily ever after! Nothing!”

I answer her calmly. “I don't have *nothing*.” I repeat the words that I had just two days ago said to Snow White. “I still have my pride.”

“Pride?” she sneers. “What good will that do when you're alone and unhappy, miserable and starving and—”

“And I have my self-respect.” I cut her off. “I can make my own happily ever after.”

“Your own happily ever after?” her voice is cold and mocking. “The saying is, ‘And *they* lived happily ever after,’ not ‘And *she* lived happily ever after,’ you stupid twit!”

I shrug my shoulders and leave her ranting where she is. I watch as Snow White and Prince Charming accept well wishes and congratulations from everyone around them. Snow looks happy. Maybe it won't be for ever after, but at least she's happy now.

I stare at the sunset that I was supposed to ride off into. The red, pink, and orange hues cast a warm glow on the distant horizon. Who knows what is happening at that exact place where the sun touches the earth. I always wondered what the world was like outside my step-mother's house. I'd been too afraid to find out for myself.

And then it hits me. I had been going after the wrong thing all along. It wasn't a *happily ever after* ending that I needed. My eyes light on Charming's stallion, still tethered nearby. Ready and waiting.

Once upon a time...

Now that's more like it.

*

Victoria Madeline

For Stephie.

Madeline slowly opened the door to her sixth-floor, single-bedroom apartment and held her breath. For a brief second she thought the initial silence that had greeted her would last only to have a soft, anguished wail shatter that hope. With a sigh, she continued into the foyer setting down her coat and briefcase.

“Stella? I’m home,” she called out with forced cheeriness.

If anything, the whimpers of distress grew louder, echoing down the long hallway as she made her way into the living room. A lump in gray sweatpants and a ragged Harvard sweatshirt lay sprawled on her burgundy couch emitting cries similar to that of a dying baby seal. Madeline winced at the pathetic sight of her older sister. At twenty-six, Stella, up until a few months ago, had been considered quite gorgeous. Certainly the prettier of the two sisters. But now, her curly brown hair had lost its luster and was matted to her head, and her bright green eyes were puffy and blood-shot—the result of never-ending crying. She had already been model thin but was now bordering on morbidly frail.

As usual, the blinds were drawn giving the room an eerie cave-like feel; melancholy classical music was playing softly, and an empty tea cup was buried amongst piles and piles of crumpled, used tissues.

Madeline sighed once again. Same old, same old. “Stella, you okay?” she started to turn away towards her bedroom, already anticipating the customary “I’m fine” that had been her sister’s response everyday without fail since she had come to stay. Her sister pretended to be “fine” and Madeline pretended to believe her. It was much simpler that way.

“Do you know what day it is today?” came a small, hoarse voice.

Madeline froze.

Uh-oh.

That was *not* an “I’m fine.”

She stared longingly at her room in silence before slowly pivoting around.

Stella sat upright on the couch staring out into space with dull eyes. Madeline peered at her through thick glasses and ran a hand over her frizzy, red-brown hair. She had had a long day at the firm and today really was not the best time for this.

“Um, it’s a Tuesday?”

Stella sniffed. And began crying again.

Alarmed, Madeline began wracking her brain. “It’s uh, April 12th?”

Sniff.

“It’s b-been exactly th-three months since...since...” Stella’s sobbing started up again in full force, causing her to start hiccupping.

Oh. Jesus.

Madeline resignedly sat down in an armchair and faced her sister. Doctor Mulroy at the hospital had said that she would eventually come out of her emotional coma and finally be able to talk about what happened. Madeline had hoped that that time would come later rather than sooner.

She loved her sister, she really did, but for the past eighteen years, ever since their mother died, Madeline had played the part of the older sister/mother. Stella might have had everything—beauty, brains, and charisma—but she was also reckless to the point of stupidity and had the emotional stability of an F5

tornado. Over the years, Madeline had had to endure countless temper tantrums, breakdowns, and periods of depression from her sister. Stella had been in and out of therapy, been arrested, and had her fair share of drunken nights spent hugging the toilet. And amidst the series of boyfriends and heartbreaks and other miscellaneous crises that made up the soap opera that was Stella's life, Madeline—the *younger* sister by two years—had always been there to bail her out or offer a shoulder to cry on.

Only now, Madeline didn't know how to reach her sister. She didn't know how to handle a situation like this. And quite frankly, she was tired of playing therapist. She'd never understood why Stella couldn't just accept things as they came and move on when life threw its various curveballs. She could never comprehend why Stella always made everything more difficult. Why she couldn't just shrug it off and not get so emotional about everything. Even the littlest things got her upset for the most absurd lengths of time. Though it had been hell having to watch her sister deteriorate into the pathetic, always-crying, train wreck that she'd become, at least they hadn't had to talk about it. She was almost glad that Stella had been too lost in her own world to drag Madeline down into it, as well.

Madeline tried not to grimace as her sister wiped a glob of snot from her face with the back of her sleeve.

“God, what must you think of me?” Stella muttered desolately looking down at herself.

Madeline shifted uncomfortably. “It's okay, Stell. I understand...”

“No, you really don’t. I’ve been crying for the past three months straight,” she lifted vacant green eyes towards her sister. “I don’t think you’ve cried *once* in the past three years.”

Madeline immediately became rigid, sensing where this conversation was going.

“Stella, this isn’t about—”

“You never cry. Don’t you think there’s something wrong with that? Even when Kevin left you. You didn’t even care. Why didn’t you care? Why couldn’t you have at least shown some sort of emotion?”

Madeline was instantly defensive. “If I want a therapist, I’ll hire one. Besides, I don’t think you should talk about anyone else’s emotions, Stella. You’re not exactly adept at balancing your own.”

“You think *I’m* emotionally imbalanced?”

Madeline pointedly looked down at the crumpled up tissues scattered on the floor and her sister’s disheveled appearance. She would bet her life that Stella hadn’t showered once in the past two weeks.

“You’re just as emotionally imbalanced as I am, Maddy,” she replied quietly. “I just happen to be on one end of the spectrum, while you’re completely on the other. You have *no* emotions.”

Madeline opened her mouth to protest, but her older sister pressed on. “I may have an over-abundance of emotions, and tend to get, well...hysterical sometimes, but at least I let it all out instead of holding everything back. My way is much healthier. People are *supposed* to feel. That’s why we’re human.”

Madeline snorted dismissively. “I am perfectly able to handle and express appropriate emotions.”

“You laughed at Great-aunt Josie’s funeral,” her sister accused.

She glared, indignant. “I did not!”

“Well, even if you didn’t laugh, you certainly did *not cry*.”

“We didn’t even *know* our Great-aunt Josie! The day of the funeral was the first time we’d ever seen her!”

Stella sniffed superciliously. “Everyone else was crying.”

Madeline ground her teeth and managed to restrain herself from hurling the box of tissues at Stella’s head. “I know what this is. Freud calls it projection. It’s a defense mechanism because you can’t deal with your *own* problems so you have to put them on me.”

Stella breathed deeply, trying to act the composed older sister. “Don’t you dare condescend to me, Maddy. I am not a twelve year-old child.”

But Madeline had finally had enough. Eighteen years, the past three months—it was finally enough. “Then stop acting like one! Get off my couch and get on with your own life!”

Stella reeled back as if she’d been physically slapped. Her eyes once again pooled with tears. “How can you be so insensitive?”

Madeline made a non-intelligible growl of frustration. “Stell, it’s been three months. THREE MONTHS. You lost a baby. I’m sorry. But do you remember when you called me sobbing that night you took the pregnancy test? How scared you were? It would have changed your entire life! You hadn’t even

planned to conceive. Your relationship with Alex was already over—he didn’t even know you were pregnant! God knows someone as stern and unyielding as he was wouldn’t have ever been able to cope with a child. He couldn’t even handle you!” She sighed loudly, trying to temper her attack. “Your entire pregnancy was an accident, and if you think about it rationally, maybe the miscarriage wasn’t such a terrible thing in the long run. It just wasn’t its time to be born.”

Stella leapt out of her seat, fists balled in anger, causing Madeline to jump in surprise. “THE BABY WASN’T AN *IT*!” Stella screamed hysterically, finally breaking. Finally exhibiting the passionate, over-zealous response that had always been her forte. “It was a *she*! I had a baby girl! They told me afterwards at the hospital.” Her violent sobs were now making her words almost incomprehensible, and it was she who now angrily hurled the tissue box straight at Madeline’s head. “Don’t you ever try to tell me my miscarriage was a blessing!” Stella was now breathing heavily, to the point of hyperventilating, glaring at Madeline with crazed, rage-filled eyes. “To hell with Alex and to hell with you! I carried my baby for almost four months. I felt her move. You don’t know what it’s like. You don’t know how it feels to hurt so deeply you can’t even breathe from the pain of it. You just think I’m crazy. Crazy, hysterical Stella—one little miscarriage and she goes off the deep-end.” Her self-deprecating laugh held a twinge of cynicism.

Then, it was as if suddenly the fight was knocked out of her. She looked down at herself, at the box of tissues that lay by her sister’s feet with shame. Stella finally collapsed back onto the couch, tears still streaming silently down her

face. How she managed to go from menacing fury to helpless little girl in the span of two seconds, Madeline would never know.

“I named her Victoria Madeline,” Stella muttered dejectedly, the fight finally gone out of her.

Madeline stared at her sister in silence, the surprise she felt not evident on her face. She glanced away, searching for a response.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Stella glared at her. “Like you cared. All you did was gave me a place to stay and having done that, you just washed your hands of me.”

“Stell, everyday I asked you—,”

“Yea, but you didn’t really care, did you? You didn’t really want an answer. That would’ve only forced you to deal with me. To have to listen to me.”

Madeline looked away. A rush of emotions she usually kept suppressed swept through her. For a split second, Madeline felt the urge to run to her room, to escape these feelings she’d always simply avoided. But her rational brain, so used to taking charge, had now been overpowered by her limbic system.

Victoria Madeline.

She took a deep breath, stood, and plopped down close onto the couch next to her sister. The room was tense with silence and a deflated Stella simply turned away.

“What do you think she—,” Madeline found herself getting choked and had to clear her throat. “What do you think she would have been like?”

Stella appeared surprised by her question. And then she seemed to actively give the question consideration. A small ghost of a smile played at the corners of her lips, as she thought about it for a while.

“She would have loved chocolate.”

Madeline laughed shakily, taking this in. “If she was anything like you, she would have been beautiful.” Stella once again looked surprised at her sister’s words. “Except when she cried.”

Stella’s laugh was rusty. There was silence for a while, both women lost in their own thoughts.

“I would have been a terrible mother.”

Madeline’s eyes widened. Normally her sister was so self-centered, she didn’t believe she could do anything wrong.

She slipped her hand into Stella’s. “You would have been a great mother,” Madeline assured her quietly.

Stella only looked even sadder and breathed a miserable sigh. “I can’t even be a good sister. I wouldn’t have known how to be a good mother.”

Madeline stroked her sister’s hair comfortingly. “I mean...what exactly *is* a ‘good mother’ anyway? It’s not like we would have had anyone to emulate. Mom wasn’t there to—,”

“I know, Maddy,” Stella cut in quietly. “I know.”

Madeline smiled encouragingly. “You would have loved that little girl more than anything. And that’s why you would have been a great mother.”

She watched as the skepticism and disbelief on her sister's face changed to relief. For the first time in the past three months, Madeline finally saw light in her eyes. The two shared a look of understanding, and were quiet for a long time, still holding hands.

Victoria Madeline.

Her niece.

No longer could she think of the baby as an abstract, unreal, wisp of an actual *thing*. The baby had a name.

That wave of protectiveness and pity she'd always felt for her sister once again surged forward. Only this time, it was empathy rather than sympathy. This time, she too felt the loss of the beautiful, chocolate-loving Victoria Madeline.

*

Escapades of a Zookeeper

For Danielle, Puja, and Katie—my own gang of squirrel monkeys.

“Enter!”

I practically jump out of my skin at the sudden barked command. I try to take a calming breath and with trembling hands open the door and step inside. Seeing my boss Mr. Fitzgerald, I begin sweating profusely under my uniform. It isn't that Fitzgerald is overly large or physically intimidating...I mean he's bigger than me, but who isn't? He just seems even bigger with his blustering personality and severe looks.

I stand awkwardly at the door, not really knowing what to do or say. Running a hand through my hair, I readjust my cap and try not to fidget. Mr. Fitzgerald is too engrossed in reading something and hasn't even bothered to look up. He's probably forgotten I'm even here. I finally clear my throat. Nothing.

Oh god.

I hesitantly take a few steps forward hoping the movement will catch his attention. Still nothing. Finally, I manage to inch my way right in front of the desk. Silence stretches on for eternity.

“S-sir?”

Mr. Fitzgerald's head snaps up, and he glares at me in surprise.

I kind of jump back instinctively. “Y-you wanted to s-see me, Sir?”

Realization slowly dawns on him. I can tell he's looking at me without actually seeing me. That happens a lot. People take in my smaller than average height, thinning brown hair, nondescript grey eyes, and introverted manner then don't bother going any further.

“Ah, yes...Marvin, I'm glad you're here. You're the zookeeper in charge

of the monkey house, are you not?”

My name is not Marvin.

“Yes, Sir. But actually m-my name is—”

“Excellent. Now I wanted to let you know in advance that there are going to be some changes, Marvin. Some of the animals will be traded to the Philadelphia Zoo in the next coming week. As the head zookeeper I want you to inform the rest of the staff.”

Alarm bells go off in my head. “Traded?”

“Here’s a list of all the tag numbers of the animals they’re taking away. Staff will be coming in throughout the next few days to transport them. I’m warning you beforehand so you don’t think they’re stealing them or something.” Fitzgerald laughs at the absurdity of his own joke and slides a piece of paper towards me before lighting a cigar.

I don’t move. Can’t.

My boss blows out an annoyed puff of smoke. “That’s all Marvin.”

I pick up the paper and study it for a moment. My eyes suddenly widen in shock.

“But, Sir—”

“What is it, Marvin?”

I try not to start hyperventilating.

“It’s just that you can’t—”

“I can’t *what?*”

I’m now hyperventilating.

“Number 41687, his name is Clive, he’s a v-very special monkey. I-I don’t think it would be a good idea to trade him in—”

Mr. Fitzgerald starts blustering, and his puff of smoke goes from annoyed to angry. “I don’t give a damn about what monkey number 1-800-4222 does. If it says it’s getting traded, it’s getting traded. Unless it can miraculously spin a web that spells words, that’s final.” His face relaxes just a tad. “You’ve been with us, what? Twenty-some years, right Marvin?”

I nod mechanically. Twenty years exactly.

“Hell, we’re not getting rid of the entire exhibit. You’ll still have plenty of those rodents to play with *and* your job. So don’t worry about it.”

The panic is overwhelming me. He doesn’t know what he’s doing.

“But what about Clive—?”

“That’s all, Marvin.”

* * * * *

I slide my authorization card and enter the main chamber of the monkey house. The rest of the guys are probably on their eighth coffee break of the day; the rooms are devoid of any other human presence. I begin robotically filling feeders and changing water bowls in each exhibit. The sound of chattering monkeys echoes overhead in the large domed building. I approach the last exhibit where the sign reads “Squirrel Monkeys -- *Simia sciurea*.”

I guess that’s the breaking point.

I finally slump onto a stool, face in my hands. *What am I going to do?*

Mr. Fitzgerald wouldn’t even listen. He doesn’t understand. No one understands.

It is the story of my life. I've never been good at making friends or being "cool" and part of the group. People like me...we aren't the movers and shakers of the world. I'm not a big city person and coming to Brooklyn when I was just sixteen, forced me to find a comfortable niche fast, and that niche just so happened to be the Brooklyn Zoo. My best friend is a primate. Above in the foliage and greenery, the squirrel monkeys, oblivious to everything else, swing from branch to branch and chatter wildly at one another. I feel a small weight drop onto my shoulder.

"Hi Clive."

I look into his beady eyes set in a small, black and white face and can't help but smile. We've been through a lot, me and him. He was just born and rejected by his mother and troop when I'd been appointed head monkey zookeeper twelve years ago. Now, the other monkeys are somewhat more accepting of him, but like me, he doesn't really care either way.

He starts rifling through my pockets with those tiny orange arms of his, looking for the bag of berries I save just for him everyday. I look at him, a wave of tenderness rushing through me. He's like my kid, I think to myself, starting to get maudlin. But I can't help it. I'm important in Clive's life, important like I've never been to anyone else. And now he's leaving. Clive senses my distress and pauses to look at me.

"You're going to Philadelphia," I whisper sadly. Clive begins chattering back. "There's nothing I can do about it." Clive cocks his head like he does when he's listening. "They're taking you away, and I can't stop them."

He looks at me reproachfully. Or at least, if a monkey *could* look reproachful, he was doing it now. “What!? I can’t do anything!” I throw my hands in the air and start pacing. “Maybe we could switch your tag with one of the other monkeys!” I pause and frantically kneel in front of him, grasping his little foot gently and studying the tiny almost imperceptible metal band around his leg. It was on there tight, meant *not* to come off. “Maybe if I found tiny little pliers...?” I lean in closer, trying to see if I can slip it off his foot, knowing the effort is futile, yet too desperate to care at this point. Clive bops me on the nose, and takes his foot back, indignant. I collapse onto the floor. “You’re right,” I mumble into the concrete. “I just don’t know what else to do!”

He pats me on the arm, comfortingly. He doesn’t even appear worried. I suddenly stand and straighten myself out. It’s because he has faith in me. It’s because he knows he can depend on me. No one else ever thought that. “I’ll find a way,” I promise aloud, more to myself than to him.

* * * * *

It’s now night and I’m pacing the floor of my living room. Seeing as how it is a tiny, one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, however, I’m really only taking a few steps back and forth. I start getting dizzy and collapse onto my worn-out couch. I still don’t know what to do. With a sigh, I grab the photo album resting on a small side table. The first picture is of a smiling teenager in a zookeeper uniform and cap, standing proudly in front of the entrance gates of the Brooklyn Zoo. I flip through and stop at a close-up photo of me cradling a small baby monkey. The next few feature me with Clive at various stages of growth, in

different poses throughout the zoo. I find myself getting teary-eyed and slam the photo album shut.

What can I do?

A surge of energy and determination suddenly rises within me. It has to be something bold. Something crazy. Something unpredictable!

I jump to my feet and glance at my apartment. It's sparse, filled with neutral colored furniture and very, very neat. The books on my shelves are arranged alphabetically, the potted plants by my window are trimmed and contained, and the shoes by the front door are in a nice, orderly row. The only decorations are the various black and white photographs I've taken and framed on the walls. The energy rushes out of me like a deflating balloon. Who am I kidding? I look down at my pressed white button down and khakis. I sit back down.

Sighing, I try to look on the bright side. How many days do I have left with him? I force myself to replay the previous conversation with Mr. Fitzgerald.

Staff will be coming in throughout the next few days to transport them. I'm warning you beforehand, so you don't think they're stealing them or something.

A light suddenly flicks on in my head. A wild, crazy idea is forming, and I'm almost afraid to even think it. I couldn't do it....*could I?* That would be ridiculous. Completely out of character. No one would ever expect me to do that. Not safe, predictable, boring Malcolm. A gleam comes to my eye born of desperation and a lifetime of blending in and being afraid.

No one would ever expect me to do that...

* * * * *

I can't believe I'm doing this. I leave my bike down the road hidden in the bushes, fearful that someone might see my getaway vehicle. As calmly as possible, I walk to the front gates to the security booth.

"That you, Malcolm?" Pete, the elderly night guard flashes a light in my eyes, almost blinding me.

"H-hi, Pete." My voice sounds unnaturally high even to me.

"What are you doing here, Son? It's almost nine-thirty."

Go time.

"I f-forgot to administer an-antibiotics to one of the monkeys." *Oh god, I sound like a prepubescent boy.* I clear my throat and try to stop shaking. I wonder if he can see my face heating up. Pete frowns skeptically, and I try desperately not to look away.

Keep eye contact, keep eye contact.

"It couldn't wait till tomorrow?"

I shake my head. "The monkey h-has been very sick lately, and I-I'm worried that something might happen to him over night if he's left untreated."

Pete studies me for a little while. I start perspiring profusely.

He knows! Any minute now he's going to call me out for the lying thief that I am. I'm going to go to jail! I'll lose my job! I'll never see Clive again! Why did I stupidly think I could pull something like this off?! I've never even gotten a

parking ticket in my life—never mind the fact that I don't even own a car! He can see right through me. He—

“Okay, Son. I know how you get with those damn monkeys of yours. You really gotta start focusing some of that attention on real people. Find yourself a nice woman or something...”

His voice trails off, and I stare in stupefaction as the zoo gates slowly slide open. At first I can't even move. He believed me! He actually believed me! Nodding my thanks, I take a calming breath and try to walk in as naturally as possible. I was in! Now I just had to get back out...

* * * * *

“Clive,” I whisper up, peering into the dark tree leaves. “Clive!”

Somewhere in the large chamber, a howler monkey starts squawking, sensing my presence. I wince at the loud echoing sound. I begin to panic. *What if I've been too long and Pete comes in to look for me?!*

“Clive!!”

Suddenly, a familiar weight drops onto my shoulder.

I sigh in relief and open the backpack I'd brought filled with nuts and berries to keep him occupied.

“Jump in,” I whisper. “We're going for a little trip.”

* * * * *

I can't believe I did it.

The adrenaline is still pumping through my veins when I get back to my apartment. I immediately unzip my backpack and let Clive jump out. He studies his new surroundings with fascination.

“This is your new home, Clive,” I announce beaming. “Now they can’t take you away anymore.”

* * * * *

The next day I walk into work feeling different. There’s a new pep to my step, and I honestly feel like I could do anything. When the transporters from the Philadelphia Zoo come in, I help them start locating and caging the two dozen or so various monkeys on the list. I get a little nervous when they can’t locate monkey number 41687. But I guess I’ve gotten better at lying, and this time I merely smile and shrug my shoulders pretending to be just as perplexed as they are.

* * * * *

My once neat apartment now looks like a tornado has blown through. Pillow stuffing is everywhere, everything that was once on the shelves is now strewn on the floor, and I’m pretty sure Clive attempted to eat my plants. I gaze in horror at the mess and destruction. This is not the apartment of a predictable, boring, thirty-six year old man. Clive is swinging from a hanging lamp attached to the ceiling. He smiles at me, oblivious to the fact that I’m now realizing I have no idea what I’ve gotten myself into.

* * * * *

“We’re going to the diner that I always eat at across the street,” I tell Clive as I zip him up in my backpack. “You’re going to be quiet and stay in the bag. I apparently can’t risk leaving you here by yourself again.”

I enter Jody’s Diner and take a seat at my usual corner booth. Cherry, the night waitress who I’ve known for years brings me a water. She’s always been really nice to me, but then she’s nice to everyone.

“Hey, Sugar.” She brushes a loose strand of bright red hair from her face. “The usual.”

It’s not really a question. I’ve been coming to this diner every night at 7:00 for almost eight years now. And I’ve always ordered the same thing: a small house salad and a piece of plain chicken.

I look down at the backpack by my side and consider this. “Um, could you add a fruit cup to my usual order?”

She looks at me, suspicious. “You wanna fruit cup?”

I nod nervously.

Normally nothing gets by this tough, Brooklyn broad who probably stands about 5 foot even. Fist fights, drunkenness, and rude customers—Cherry has seen it all. She’s now standing there, looking at me with sharp, lime green eyes. It’s as if she can see into my very soul.

“Hm...you’ve never strayed from your usual order before. I thought you said fruit made you nauseated, Mal?”

I gulp audibly. “I just want to try something new.”

She's still staring at me, but silently nods her head. "Okay...a fruit cup it is." Cherry turns to leave, then swings back around. "Is that a new shirt?" She points down at my plaid button-up. Clive had ruined all my other clothes, so I'd been forced to buy some new ones.

"Um, yes, I-it's-um...yes."

Smooth.

She smiles though. That same smile she always gives to all her customers, only tonight I feel a bit warmer. This is the most words we've exchanged in the past eight years, and I'm starting to feel light-headed.

"Well," she pauses. "I like it."

I don't even need to formulate a response—not that I probably could have—because she's off and disappearing back into the kitchen in less than a millisecond.

I sit back in my seat, staring after her bemusedly.

* * * * *

It's been three days. I'm starting to realize that a monkey isn't the most ideal roommate. I'm tired and my life has been turned upside down. I don't really know if I'm equipped to do this. Not safe, boring, dependable Malcolm.

The phone in the office rings, and I snap out of my reverie to answer it.

Oh god.

"Hi Sir—I um, I had no idea—I d-don't know—actually, Sir my name is—well maybe the handlers accidentally took number 41687 but just didn't

record it—Yes, I know animals can't just disappear—I'll do my best, Sir—
Goodb—”

That did not go very well.

My brain starts racing with possibilities of all the ominous consequences that could befall me for stealing a monkey from a zoo.

* * * * *

“The defendant, Malcolm Malone, has been found guilty of the felony of grand larceny. His sentence is to be ten years in the New York State Prison with no parole. This court is adjourned.”

The wooden gavel bangs down with finality. My life is flashing before my very eyes. Being boring and quite monotonous, it flashes by pretty quickly. I am left standing there in a cold sweat as officers approach to handcuff and lead me away. I panic and try to fight them off. Mr. Fitzgerald watches smugly from the rows. This can't be happening. No! No! Nooooooooooooo!

I wake up and find myself in that cold sweat, but luckily *not* in the court room. My breathing is heavy and I glance towards the tree I'd bought so that Clive would have somewhere more familiar to sleep. The source of my nightmare doesn't stir. It takes me a while to get back to sleep that night.

* * * * *

“Malcolm, what's wrong? You look like hell.”

I can't help blushing under Cherry's intense scrutiny. “Late night,” I mumble under my breath and look away. *Every night* this past week since Mr. Fitzgerald's call has been a late night. She sets down my food but doesn't go

away. I finally look back up to find her still staring at me seemingly lost in thought. Seconds turn to minutes...she still hasn't left, and she still has not stopped staring.

I finally get somewhat exasperated. "What is it?"

She blinks at me with those lollipop eyes. "It's just that you've been acting real different lately, Mal."

It must be suspicion from the wild berry danish and chocolate shake I got for breakfast rather than my usual toast and eggs. Her eyes practically took over her entire face when I gave her my order and now she's probably waiting to see if I'll actually eat it. I shift uncomfortably and clear my throat. "I'm under some stress from...erm—work."

She frowns. "In the past seven or eight years that you've been coming here and I've been working here, I've never once seen you act differently 'cause of stress."

This woman is way too perceptive.

She gestures towards me. "You're even sitting differently."

I look down surprised, not aware of anything abnormal going on down there.

"You normally slouch," she states baldly.

It's my turn to stare in incredulity. "I hadn't realized...I'm surprised *you* noticed."

Cherry finally looks away and fidgets awkwardly in place. A slight blush tinges her cheeks and that, coupled with her bright red hair, makes her namesake

seem even more appropriate. She's silent for almost a minute, before she darts away to take someone else's order. Not for the first time in my life am I speechless, but this time it's for the sheer fact that I don't think *anyone* has ever rendered Cherry Pierce speechless. I take a bite of my danish and find an inexplicable smile forming on my lips.

* * * * *

I make my way slowly back into the main monkey house atrium and sit down robotically. My heart is beating wildly, and I can't even think straight. As soon as I got into work, Mr. Fitzgerald's secretary paged me. At that moment I knew I was in trouble. It's been over a week and a half since the handlers could not find monkey number 41687. There is a missing monkey from the Brooklyn Zoo, and as head zookeeper of primate exhibits, Mr. Fitzgerald wants *my* head. I tried to convince him that maybe there was a misprint in the I.D. number (he luckily—and not surprisingly—didn't remember from our first conversation that number 41687 was Clive), but he then sent me to fetch the records from our files and low and behold...monkey number 41687 *does* exist. Mr. Fitzgerald is now suspicious that foul play is involved he luckily (and once again, not surprisingly) doesn't suspect me—yet—but he's threatening to get the authorities involved. My boss is the type of person who does love uproar as long as he's in the center of it all, and I would not be surprised if he used this whole fiasco to alert the media and create publicity for himself. I don't know what to do.

* * * * *

Clive is angry at me. He's torn up my apartment again while I was out buying fruit for him. I can tell he's getting restless and tired of spending so much time indoors. At least at the zoo he always had company and there was something exciting going on up in those trees from time to time. I can't help but sigh in frustration. I'm starting to realize that keeping Clive was selfish. He's not any happier here even though he's with me. But I really don't know what to do. Mr. Fitzgerald is starting to become obsessive over the missing monkey. And I know him—once he thinks something is up, he doesn't rest till he solves it (or thinks he does anyway). What do I do?

I suddenly feel the urge to talk to someone. Someone who won't just listen, like Clive, but who'll actually talk back...

* * * * *

I enter Jody's Diner and almost subconsciously look for that fire engine red head. Cherry is saying good-bye to the other waitresses and putting on her coat as she heads towards me to the door. I feel deflated upon realizing that she's leaving. Trying to turn around without being seen is futile—she's already spotted me and comes rushing over.

“Mal, what's wrong?” Worry is etched on her face. “It's almost 11:00.”

I laugh uncomfortably. “What? I can't come in for a late night cup of coffee?”

The look on her dumbfounded face says 'no.' I realize dejectedly that I was so predictable that coming into the diner at a different hour is apparently equivalent to pigs flying.

“I just wanted...I thought you’d still be...Never mind, I was just leav—” I stop suddenly.

Was it really so crazy that I would come into the diner that I eat at everyday just for a cup of coffee one night? It’s coffee! I want it! It’s a diner! It makes sense. So what if I’ve only ever come to Jody’s Diner at specific times precisely on the hour? I stole a monkey for Pete’s sake!

These past few days coalesce, and everything that I’ve done comes flashing to the foreground of my mind. I’m flabbergasted. Where had the predictable, boring Malcolm gone? I, who have always been afraid of standing out and doing things out of the ordinary, have done complete 180. For some reason, I find this funny. There, in the entrance to the diner, with Cherry staring at me, I start to laugh. Hysterical, self-freeing laughter which breaks through the low chatter of the diner and lifts my spirits. Everyone is staring at me in confusion and Cherry looks somewhat afraid. I don’t care though. And that in itself only makes me laugh harder.

I finally calm down. A little goofy grin is still plastered to my face but I’m no longer cackling like the Joker. Cherry now looks very concerned.

“Are you okay, Malcolm? Do you need to sit down or something?”

I take a deep breath.

“Cherry, do you want to sit down and have a cup of coffee...with me?”

* * * * *

We’re on our fourth cup of coffee. It was odd at first, actually sitting face to face with someone in my usual booth. But though I was terribly nervous, we

managed to keep up a steady stream of conversation. I told her about my job at the zoo and a little about Clive and she talked about how she was taking night classes at a local college. We laughed about some of the other regulars who came into the diner and she gossiped to me about some of more eccentric ones. I even admitted to her my secret passion of photography.

At a lull in the conversation she looks me in the eye.

“What’s wrong, Malcolm?”

I start to deny that anything is wrong but her stern, no BS look stops me. I sigh.

“Well, I have this close friend and he wants to move out of New York...because of...a job.” Cherry nods in understanding and sympathy.

“And I don’t know if I should um...let him.”

She looks a little confused. “He needs your permission?”

I’m uncomfortable. “Well...he really values my advice. Enough to let it be the deciding factor in whether or not he goes or stays.”

“I see...” she replies slowly. She’s thoughtful for a few seconds. “Well if it’s better for him to move, don’t you think you should encourage him to go for it? You could always visit him.”

I nod, already having figured out the answer. Knowing and doing are two very separate things, though. “Yea, well...if he goes, I don’t really have many other friends here...I don’t know who I would um...hang out with.”

Cherry looks down at some spot on the table for a really long time. Then finally something that sounds aching close to “You could hang out with me” is mumbled out of her mouth.

“*With you?!*” I realize too late that my raised voice does little to hide my outright shock and the fact that I’m completely taken aback.

A fierce glare is directed at me, and though I’m short, I remind myself I’m at least a good five inches taller than her. “Yes, ME!” she snaps, the red headedness making itself known. “I do hang out outside of the diner too, Malcolm. And we’re...friends.” She gets defensive. “Or at least, I’d like to think so.”

I stumble to reassure her. “No, I didn’t mean—I wasn’t implying that you—I just didn’t think you’d ever want to—hang out with me, that is,” I finish lamely.

Cherry rolls her eyes in exasperation. “Of course I would, you idiot! Why do you think I was always nice to you all these years? Why do you think I took the dinner weekday shifts and the Saturday early morning shifts?”

I’m flabbergasted. It’s like I’ve been hit by lightning. The tough, take no prisoners Brooklyn waitress looks unsure of herself for one of the first times ever.

I tentatively take her hand in mine from across the table. That crazy Joker grin is starting to return. “I came in every Saturday morning because that’s when I thought *you* chose to work.”

* * * * *

I give Clive tight hug. “It’s time to go.” I open the backpack once again filled with nuts and berries. I’m no longer afraid. If I can sneak a monkey out of zoo, I can sneak him back inside no problem. Before, I might have been worried that Clive would be lonely and wouldn’t make new friends in Philadelphia. But now I know it’s not all that hard. He just needs the motivation and the chance to spur it all along. Clive jumps in and begins chattering excitedly sensing that we’re heading back. For a long time I thought all we both needed was each other. But now I know it’s time for his own adventure.

* * * * *

I don’t even bother to knock this time. With steady hands and shoulders back, I confidently stride into the room, letting it close with a bang. Fitzgerald is once again sitting at his desk looking over papers, yet his attention is immediately caught at my entrance.

“Marvin, did I send for you?” he asks frowning.

My name isn’t Marvin.

“No, Sir. And my name is—”

“I’m glad the monkey situation was all sorted out, Marvin. Good work. That’s all now.” Fitzgerald lights up another of his cigars and takes a deep contented puff, summarily dismissing me. I take a deep breath and raise my head just a notch higher.

“My name is *Malcolm*, Sir. *MALCOLM!* Not Marvin. And I’m turning in my two weeks notice.”

Fitzgerald starts blustering in anger. But I persist. “My *girlfriend* has some friends at the newspaper. They liked my portfolio. I’m going to try my hand at photography.”

“Photography?! But, Mar—Malcolm! You can’t do this. You’ve been here for...forever!”

I suddenly turn to leave. A weight has lifted off of me, and I feel free. Freer than Clive running loose throughout my apartment. At the door I pause. Without even bothering to look back, I smile.

“It’s time for a change,” I say with finality. I let the door close behind me.

*

Reflective Essay

As stated in the abstract, every author's writing style is unique. But more than that, the inspiration, thinking-process, and revisions of a single writer vary from story to story. Therefore, I am going to discuss and reflect on each story by itself rather than as a whole thesis. It is my hope that readers will better understand what was going on in my head through the various stages of crafting each story. I will also clarify my intentions and interpretations of what might be (unconsciously or consciously) ambiguous scenes or facets of each story.

Lake

"Lake" was written for an HNR Creative Fiction Workshop course this past spring 2008 semester. I took it with Phil LaMarche, and he helped me a great deal with crafting this piece. Unlike the rest of the stories in this collection, "Lake" had outside factors concerning its structure; I did not just write what I wanted or what came to mind. The first half of the HNR course, before we got into workshop, was focused on theory and technique. We read various other short stories—from Marquez, to Hemingway, to Carver—and subsequently had class discussions on what we thought worked for the story and what did not.

One assignment was to pick an already written and published short story we liked and discuss in an essay what technical aspects we would "steal" from the author and incorporate into our own pieces.

I picked Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" which was one of the stories we had been assigned to read for the class. It follows a family

on a trip to Florida where they encounter an escaped serial-killer called the Misfit and all end up murdered. Though it often gets mixed reviews, as evident from the ensuing class discussion, I thought that as a whole, the story worked on many levels. Most compelling to me were the character development and the religious themes.

O'Connor sets up her two main characters—the old lady and the Misfit—to be a certain way but then complicates them. We as readers *should* like the little granny, but really she is ignorant, racist, and a nag. We *should* hate the serial killer, the Misfit. However, O'Connor presents him in a way that makes the reader sympathize with him and makes him funny and thus more likable.

O'Connor somehow manages to create characters that we love to hate and hate to love—a rare dynamic. I wanted to use this in my own story.

In addition, I knew I wanted to incorporate religious undertones into my story, which is what O'Connor is known for using. In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” she does this through the Misfit. He gets philosophical when he compares himself to Jesus and ponders the concept of sin, which thus adds depth to the story. The piece as a whole raises the implicit question of whether or not someone who has committed so many sins by killing can still be saved and what constitutes a “good” person and a “bad” person.

I had all this in mind when I began brainstorming and planning out my story. I was raised Catholic and had always found the concept of eternal sin to be fascinating, mainly because it is so contradictory. Eternal sin is a sin that is unforgivable by God. One eternal sin is actually believing that eternal sins

exist—because this in effect questions the authority of God and his power to forgive. This led to me wondering about other sins and what could and could not be forgiven by God. Suicide within the Catholic doctrine is a sin that is not forgivable to gain entry into heaven. However, what about alcoholics? Alcoholics are essentially killing themselves, over a prolonged period of time whether they die from liver poisoning or consumption or cancer. But it is not technically considered suicide. And then I wondered, what about someone who tries to drink himself to death? The motive and intent could be ambiguous—was it an accident or was it intentional? It amazed me that such a slight difference, such a seemingly minute detail, can decide one's entire afterlife if one so believes.

And so I wanted to create a character that would test this “rule” and incorporate these religious undertones—not in order to demystify them or come to a concrete answer. Rather, I hoped that my story would prompt readers to ponder these questions as well and come to their own conclusions, drawing from their own views of religion and the afterlife.

Jeremy is this character in “Lake.” He is a man who loved deeply, lost his wife, and who in his mind has nothing left to live for. The character was intentionally meant to come across as pathetic and dislikable. After all, he is an alcoholic trying to actively drink himself to death and not exactly an upstanding member of society. He is gruff and abrasive, especially when dealing with his wife. Most importantly, Jeremy is a hypocrite when it comes to his views of God; he only has “faith” because he thinks it will get him into heaven with his wife. Jeremy knows that he is slowly trying to commit suicide, but gets around it by

simply telling himself that he *can* go to heaven—thus taking the issue of eternal sin out of the picture. He thinks that since he chooses to *not* believe in eternal sin, he will not be subject to it, even if committing suicide—in effect, using one sin to cancel out the other one (thus “cheating god”). Though he is a more honest character, he can be dislikable nevertheless.

However, like the Misfit in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” I also wanted readers to feel sympathetic towards him. I wanted them to like him grudgingly. Though they didn’t necessarily have to agree with what he was trying to do, I wanted them to at the very least understand *why* he was doing it. And so I incorporated humor to try to make him more likable, the same way O’Connor does with The Misfit. Making Jeremy a down-hearted, self-pitying drunk would have made him a flat character. In the first draft of the story, there was more than one paragraph that went into the darkness and hopelessness which was his life; it just got too repetitive and cloying. So instead, there are moments when he acknowledges the humor that can be involved with being in a perpetual state of inebriation. Though the story itself is written in third-person point of view in the past tense, the “narrator” and tone of the piece comes from Jeremy. It is through his voice that we get the story. And since he is a drunken “narrator,” there is uncertainty and confusion in the telling of events that are intended to make the story more light-hearted—like when Jeremy does not at first realize he is in the row boat. Jeremy as the narrator also constantly corrects himself, which makes the reader doubt him, but also (hopefully) is amusing to a degree. Like the Misfit, Jeremy is a character that readers hate to love.

On the other hand, the character of Kate was intentionally made to come across as dislikable. Jeremy aptly describes her as “too bitchy to be an angel.” She is selfish, petulant, quick to anger, and vindictive—carrying none of the characteristics of a stereotypical angel except in her physical looks. Her interaction with Jeremy actually makes the reader feel sorry for Jeremy. This was a conscious decision and effort on my part when creating the two characters. Making Kate dislikable helped to make Jeremy more likable. Like the old lady in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” she is a character readers can love to hate.

The relationship between the two characters is a major part of the story, as well. As discussed in the abstract, the theme tying all of my stories together in this collection is love. Though “Lake” was not meant to be a love story in any way, it does represent the romantic kind of love—the kind a husband would have for a wife. Through Jeremy and Kate, I wanted to show a real relationship between two people who know each other better than they know themselves. It isn’t just happiness emanating between the lovers when they’re together; that would have been too simple and boring. Instead, they bicker to show their affection. There is wide a range of emotions in their interaction from anger to guilt to relief to understanding to sadness to amusement. They know each other’s weaknesses and what buttons to press, and sometimes use that to elicit certain responses from one another. One direction I could have taken with Kate was to make her seemingly perfect. Kind, gentle, and compassionate—making the reason Jeremy loved her very obvious. However, I wanted it to be more complicated and more real. I wanted to depict a relationship that would make

readers question, *why did he even love her?* Because to me, a major part of love is loving someone in spite of everything.

Ambiguity was a major factor in this story that contributed to the way their relationship was presented. I purposely do not come right out and explain certain parts, or make things clear. For example, it is not stated explicitly how Kate died. I left this out simply because it was not important. The readers did not need to know whether it was a car accident or cancer—just that she did die a year ago. Also, it is ambiguous whether or not Jeremy actually was responsible in some way for her death. Once again, it did not matter. The point was that he did feel guilty, but then because of his character, and because of the nature of their relationship, he would feel guilty either way. Their brief discussion about not being able to have children was also not explained fully on purpose. I just wanted to reiterate to the readers that Jeremy had nobody left to live for, and also to illustrate how in every relationship, there are some arguments that just will never go away—some underlying feelings that are ever present, even after they have been smoothed over. Even after death there remains Kate’s feeling of resentment of not having children and Jeremy’s anger.

But probably most important is the ambiguity that comes from the character of Kate. When I workshopped this story in class, the number one question I was asked by my peers was, “Is she an angel or really just a figment of Jeremy’s imagination?” The fact that Jeremy is drunk and cannot be trusted completely as a narrator adds to the confusion. However, this question is also linked to the question of what happens in the end—not what happens at the

conclusion of the story, because all stories have conclusions. But it is my belief that a successful story is one that leaves readers thinking about the story *after* the story. The question *after* the story in this case is, “What happens to Jeremy?” Does he get to heaven, as he had hoped to be with Kate? Was he forgiven by God? Or does he just die alone? The answer depends on what the reader thinks Kate is. If she is an angel, then there is a larger possibility that he made it to heaven to be with her. But if she really is just a figment of his imagination, then the likelihood is slim. I wanted readers to come up with an answer for themselves. The optimist in me would like to think that yes, she was an angel, and yes, Jeremy did make it to heaven. But on my more cynical days, I think maybe not. Maybe he was just an alcoholic who could not cope with grief and that no one can cheat their way into heaven, no matter how strong the love is. So despite this reflection being the place to clarify questions, the general answer to these two questions is: I do not know. I will leave it up to the reader.

Once Upon a Time

I wrote this story last. By the time I started brainstorming and thinking about what I wanted to write, I had already found the potential thread of love tying in the other stories together. I realized I had already covered romantic love, familial love, and the love between friends, and the only one missing was love for oneself. Though it wasn't the guiding force of the creation of this story, I kept this theme in mind while I was writing.

Like every other girl, I was raised with fairy tales of Disney, Hans Christian Anderson, and the Grimm Brothers and wanted to be a princess when I grew up. The standard structure of the fairy tale was drilled into my mind. There is the good princess who can do no wrong, the evil force (be it a witch, a dragon, an evil step-mother) out to crush her simply because she must be crushed, and the gallant hero (Prince Charming) who comes in to save the princess and defeat the evil force in the end. There is the beginning, the middle, and the end. And through it all, we learn the basic lesson that good always triumphs over evil. That the princess gets the prince in the end. Is it any wonder that we as young girls pined for the prince, the white horse, the castle?

But when I did grow up, I began to question the entire foundation upon which these fairy tales were based. I read the feminist articles slaying these stories, much like the prince slayed the dragon, because of its patriarchal tyranny and oppression of women. Why did the princess *have* to be saved by the prince? Why did Snow White not take matters into her own hands and kill that step-mother of hers? Why could Sleeping Beauty not wake up on her own volition? Why did Cinderella not stand up for herself enough to simply walk away from her step-mother and forge her own future? Being a moderate in my own views, I asked myself these questions with more curiosity than rancor. I could see the injustice of the entire fairy tale paradigm, but I could also see the humor.

I chose to explore the humorous side, and I wondered what would happen if Prince Charming were the same person in all three stories—*Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. Instead of the noble, handsome savior, I

pictured him as a modern day “player,” and from there, my story grew. Imagine that, the Prince Charming (literally) of almost every girlhood dream turned into a player. A rake. A libertine. The paradigm would be completely thrown off. It would not even have to be a role reversal with Prince Charming as the evil force; he just had to be the hero that was fallible—unheard of in a Disney movie.

I then imagined three very angry, very beautiful women he would have to deal with and how humor could be a major player in that confrontation. Wanting to write a more light-hearted story after writing “Lake” and “Victoria Madeline” (one about a suicidal alcoholic, the other about a miscarriage) I decided to take this approach (rather than the angry feminist) with “Once Upon a Time.”

And so the story started out with Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Prince Charming—all caught up in some twisted sort of love square. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to write from the perspective of one of these women—the one that would undergo the character arc and learn the “moral” of the story—because I wanted the reader to be able to relate to one of them. I ended up choosing Cinderella because she was different from the other two in that she wasn’t already a princess and had a harsher background. She had the potential for the widest story arc, and I felt I could play around with her character, while still staying true to the fundamental structure of the fairy tale.

When crafting the character of Cinderella in my story, I wrote in my own voice. Friends who have read the story commented on the fact that Cinderella talks the way I talk and has the same kind of thought process and diction as I do. This was intentional; I purposely put myself in Cinderella’s shoes within my story

and had her character react and respond in the way that I thought I would. As stated in the abstract, the goal of writing and compiling these stories was to experiment with the different components. And so I thought it would be interesting to just write in my own voice, whereas in the other stories I wrote from the male perspective or as an impartial narrator.

I also wanted Cinderella to be a well-rounded, believable character amidst the craziness of the secondary characters. As previously mentioned, in this story I wanted to focus on love for oneself. To me, this equated with self-respect, pride, and self-worth. Cinderella is a woman who has her own doubts and fears but does know that she wants to be happy. Unfortunately, just as it has with many of the female readers, it has been drilled into her that only Prince Charming can make her happy. The *happily ever after* is so imperative because she believes that is what she is supposed to want. Yet throughout the story, since the beginning in the church, her mind rebels against this expectation. The real source of conflict within this story is character vs. self. Cinderella's journey is not the length she goes to win the competition, but rather what it takes for her to reach her epiphany in the end and stand up for herself.

As for the secondary characters, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White were meant to be extremes and not complex. Sleeping Beauty is a spoiled, take-no-prisoners brat with anger issues. Snow White is the harmless, effervescent air-head. They conform more so to the stereotypes that are attributed to women, and provide foils to the more level-headed, balanced Cinderella. They are the ones who have no qualms blindly following the storyline of the traditional fairy

tales, thus leaving Cinderella to challenge them. Sleeping Beauty spurs Cinderella on to win the competition and keeps her goal of “happily ever after” in sight, while Snow White is the catalyst that prompts Cinderella to reflect on the value of her own pride and respect.

Prince Charming too is more of a function in the story rather than being a real character. He could very easily have been made to be the villain, but I did not want to have the traditional moral of good triumphing over evil. In “Once Upon a Time,” Prince Charming is neither the hero nor the villain. I did not want readers to know right from the start whether or not Cinderella would end up with Prince Charming. I did not want it to be a complete plot twist, nor did I want the plot to be predictable. Because of this, Prince Charming does not really play a major role in the story, or as major as one might expect. He is the driving force as a concept linked to the *happily ever after* that the heroine craves. But the story is not focused on him as a character. Cinderella was not making a decision about whether or not he was a good guy or bad guy. That was not the dilemma that needed to be solved. Because this story was about *her*, Cinderella had to make the decision that was best for her, regardless of the Prince’s character. It is irrelevant whether or not he really loved her for who she was—the point is that in the end, she loves herself more.

In the same sense, Fairy Godmother plays the same role as Prince Charming. She is there to remind Cinderella of these supposed ideals of love and marriage and happily ever after that have been ingrained into her head. The Fairy Godmother is a constant reminder of what Cinderella *should* do and how she

should feel and what she *should* want. She, like the rest of the secondary characters, challenges the heroine to reach her epiphany in the end.

In this story, I wanted to bring home the fact that before you can let *someone else* make you happy, *you* have to make yourself happy first. Though it may sound trite or clichéd, you also have to love yourself before someone else can. Cinderella’s dilemma is one that many women have faced. This is in no way a feminist or misandrist piece. It is not scorning the sacrament of marriage nor the desire for domesticity. Love, as the say, is a two-way street and sacrifices must be made to allow it to survive. However, I wanted this story to raise the question of, how much do you allow yourself to give up for the sake of love? Though a story like “Lake” leaves the fundamental questions unanswered, I chose to make the answer obvious in the end. When your self-respect and pride and self-worth are at stake, then the price of loving someone else becomes too high. It is my opinion, and thus the moral of this story, that you can love someone 100%—you just have to love yourself 101%.

Victoria Madeline

“Victoria Madeline” is a story that is close to my heart, since it is based on a personal experience I have had with my own sister. The character of Madeline is based off of me, and Stella is based off of my older sister. Despite being close in age, we have always been polar opposites—specifically when it comes to dealing with emotions (as is the subject of contention within “Victoria Madeline”). Most of my story ideas come from random thoughts or are links

from experiences I've had or other stories I've read/seen. This one differs in that it originated directly from a personal experience in the form of an emotion.

Though I cannot remember what exactly took place the night my sister and I actually experienced this scene on which the story is based, nor the exact dialogue, I do remember the "oh shit" feeling I got when I found out that my sister had named her baby after me. When situations like this happen in life, you forget all the recriminations, the bitterness, and the past and focus on what is most important in the present.

This story, like the other stories within this compilation, is about love. Though it may not seem like it with Stella's constant screaming and Madeline's cold indifference, these two characters love each other in the way only family can. They may fight, but in the end they are there for each other. What this story portrays is this kind of complex relationship. Stella and Madeline are two separate forces careening in opposite directions, both too stubborn to look the other way, when all of a sudden they collide into one another. Stella throws up a brick wall which unexpectedly makes Madeline come to a screeching stop. Madeline loses her momentum and has to deal with this brick wall (the finding out that Stella named the baby Victoria Madeline). Though it may not seem significant or believable that something so small could be enough to force such a strong-willed character as Madeline to stop and think, I think it speaks volumes for her character that it does. There might have been a whole two paragraphs dedicated to Madeline's complaints about her elder sister, but she *does* love her sister. This is a moment when someone else's love makes you realize the depth of

your own. The naming gesture touches Madeline in a way that even she did not expect. She had never thought Stella would do such a thing, and it reminds her just how important she is to her sister. Which in turn reminds Madeline how important Stella is to her.

One of the main points of this story is that in the end, neither character actually changes. They both come to terms and the hope that Stella can move on and Madeline can be more accepting is there. But within the story, neither character changes. Stella is still going to be the hysteric, over-dramatic dependent, while Madeline is still going to be the emotionally reserved, responsible sibling. Having four siblings myself, three of them sisters, I have grown to learn that despite the many family squabbles—the fights and the make-ups and the “I’m sorry”s—everything basically stays the same. There might be promises to never do something again, but no one actually undergoes a life-altering experience. No one has a character arc each and every time a fight is resolved. Rather, the peace between family members comes from knowing that no matter what has happened, you love each other because of who you are. Unlike in “Lake,” where Jeremy loves Kate *in spite* of her faults, and in “Once Upon a Time” where you do something because you love yourself, the love between Madeline and Stella comes from loving *because* of each other’s faults and because (in a different way than in “Once Upon a Time”) you love that other person more than yourself.

In terms of technical aspects, unlike the other stories, “Victoria Madeline” is structured as only one continuous scene. Though it was suggested that I

elongate the story, and break it up to last a longer time span, I purposely chose to keep it in the “moment.” Fights and interactions between siblings can last for days and days, but eventually it comes to a fold—usually one big scene—and this is the scene I wanted to capture.

Also unlike the other stories, “Victoria Madeline” relies heavily on dialogue. This is one area that is often the hardest to write: believable dialogue. As I have learned in my creative fiction and screenwriting courses, dialogue within a story is not supposed to be the verbatim verbal transcript between two people, but rather a representation of such an interaction. The tricky part of the dialogue in this particular story to make it believable was tell the story through the dialogue, without actually having the characters spell out what is going on or what had happened in the past. Because the sisters are so close, and because all of the exposition has happened before this scene, the dialogue needed to seem as if though the sisters knew what each other was talking about, even by just a half-uttered phrase or one word. I also used the dialogue to create suspense in that the sisters do not immediately come out and say, “Stella had a miscarriage.” This is a classic example of one of the number one rules in creative writing: show, do not tell. Even in dialogue, you do not want the reader to think you are treating them like a child by holding their hand every step of the way to explain something. Rather, I have learned that readers prefer to figure things out on their own and that the author should trust their intelligence enough to allow them this.

The impartial narrator also allows the reader to make his or her own judgments on the characters. When I workshopped this story in class, half of my

peers favored Madeline's side, while the other half was on Stella's side. Though Madeline is technically "my" character, I did not want her to come off as being the one who is in the right. I wanted the readers to see both sides of the story and see where each character comes from. Madeline and Stella both acknowledge that they are extremes when dealing with emotions, and though it is obvious that a balance is needed, neither one of them have it. I felt this made them flawed characters, as well as relatable characters. Though the story is about their differences, it brings to light how these differences forge the bond between the two sisters.

Escapades of a Zookeeper

This story was written for Sarah Harwell's Creative Fiction Workshop summer course—the first creative fiction class I had ever taken. It is also the first complete short story I had ever written, and was my springboard into the world of creative short fiction. Though readers might debate its success as a story, had Sarah and my classmates not praised and encouraged my work in that first summer, my short fiction writing career might very well have been short-lived. As it was, when I found out I wasn't a total failure as a creative short writer, I began writing even more.

Being my first short story, I did not really know where to begin. I was used to thinking in long-term ideas for novels, but then had to figure out how to get a complete beginning, middle and end in the span of no more than twenty odd pages. I then turned to one of my screenplays I had written for a film

scriptwriting course the previous semester. It was around thirty pages. However, I always thought scripts were easier to make into short pieces because visually you can say a lot with one second, than you can with just one word. A montage lasting only ten seconds of five shots can convey an entire story or feeling. I had not thought that the same was applicable to prose fiction. However, I decided to at least give it a try and see what would happen if I tried to adapt my script into short story. I know that the reverse often happens—novels or short stories adapted into movie scripts—with sometimes great success. However, I did not know what would happen if I tried it the other way. I will admit that part of me had become desperate to find *something* to write about, and thus in a way I was taking the easy way out.

I ended up being able to write the story as if it were in scenes, similar to the break up of a script, by using breaks to denote time lapses. However, taking the script's bare-bones visual direction and turning it into descriptive exposition, flowing dialogue, and a cohesive story was easier said than done. I ended up not taking the script and page by page turning it into prose. Rather, I took the idea and the plot outline and the character sketches and ended up writing a story from there. I still *saw* it in my head as if though it were a short movie, and I think this helped with the description and the way I structured the story to play out like scenes (some of them really quick) in a movie.

The story itself, like all the other stories, is about love. But this time, love for a friend. In this case, the friend is a squirrel monkey, but Malcolm feels the same feelings as if though it were a real person—maybe more so because he has

no human outlet for whom to feel this love. The emotions within “Escapades of a Zookeeper” are different than the emotions in each of the separate stories. All the stories were supposed to be about the various aspects of love. This story is about the loyalty, protectiveness, and dependency that is felt when you love someone.

Though it may be a little ridiculous that Malcolm feels such a close connection to a monkey, the monkey was chosen for humorous reasons and the point of the power of friendship is still present. In this story, Malcolm will do *anything* for Clive. They have developed an attachment for each other in way only loneliness can produce. Malcolm views Clive as his best friend, almost like a kid brother whom he helped raise. His desperation may seem over-dramatic; but when you have a connection to just one thing/person, that thing becomes even more important to you. Malcolm has lived his whole life wholly dependent on just Clive, and when there is danger of him losing his friend, he really *does* lose it. He kidnaps a monkey. However, it is this one act of craziness that allows him to break free of his shell. Though it was by no means premeditated or intentional (after all, Clive is a monkey), Clive is the friend who prompts Malcolm to take a risk. He is the reason and the encouragement that Malcolm needs to start living his own life. I have three best friends who I have known since childhood, who unknowingly challenge me and encourage me to seize the day, everyday; a lot of my ideals of friendship come from them.

Though I did not realize it till the collection of stories was complete, this story encompasses a lot of the elements from the other stories. It is about loving oneself enough to stand up and take control of one’s life (“Once Upon a Time”).

It is about doing whatever it takes to be with the one person—or thing—you love the most (“Lake”). And it is about the loving someone no matter what—even if it is a squirrel monkey (“Victoria Madeline”). However, “Escapades of a Zookeeper” also has one lesson that the other three do not include: learning when to let go of someone you love, *because* you love them. I know this reflection has been using a lot of clichéd sayings, but they are true. Malcolm learns in the end that if you love someone, sometimes you have to let them go. And by letting go of Clive, Malcolm learns what it is to love someone else, namely Cherry.

Cherry’s original function was just to be a friend to Malcolm, who he does not even realize is his friend. But when I workshopped it in class, almost unanimously my peers said they wanted a romantic relationship between Malcolm and Cherry. I agreed, because I could see that the previous draft had the potential for romance and that it would be a good plot arc. However, I wanted to make certain that Malcolm’s love is not just a transferal from one target to another. Though it may seem too easy that the story works out in the end, I wanted this story to end happily. Malcolm does not get everything he wants in the end; Clive does not end up staying. One of the morals to take from this piece is that life and love do not always work out the way you wanted it. But the ending shows that sometimes it works out in ways you never expected it.

Summary

Four Short Stories about a Four Letter Word is a Capstone Project showcasing the author's accumulated skills in story-telling and her own unique creative writing process. It experiments with different technical aspects such as point of view, tone, dialogue, and voice, demonstrating the author's wide range of style and technique. As a whole, it functions as an exploration of the concept of love in its various forms. Though it is probably the most controversial and most popular emotion to write about, there is a reason for this: because no one person can define what it means to love someone. Every opinion and idea about love is different. So though the topic has been done before, and will continue to be done in the future, this thesis has hopefully provided a means of uncovering *new* facets of love while expressing the author's own views on the subject.

Specifically, this thesis takes a look at how love affects the relationships between people, the similarities and differences within each type of love. "Lake" focuses on the romantic love between a husband and a wife, "Once Upon a Time" focuses on love for oneself. "Victoria Madeline" focuses on the love for a family member. And "Escapades of a Zookeeper" focuses on the love between friends. Individually, the stories go in depth as to what it means to love certain people in certain ways. And together, the stories combine to make a statement about the power of love, what it means to love, and how love affects our interactions with one another.

Each story has its own different inspirations and processes of coming into creation. "Lake" was inspired by Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to

Find.” It was written for a class as a specific assignment to model one’s own story on technical aspects taken from an already published short story. “Lake” incorporates O’Connor’s underlying themes of religion, as well as O’Connor’s characterization of the protagonist and antagonist. “Once Upon a Time” was written last, after the thread of love was found in the other three, and so it took its direction from there. It was also a story the author had wanted to write about for a long time, after she realized the flaws within the fairy tale paradigm. “Victoria Madeline” was based off of the author’s own personal experiences, and the characters were modeled after her and her sister. “Escapades of a Zookeeper” was adapted from a script the author had written for a previous film class and underwent the challenges faced in converting script format into prose fiction.

The stories also have different morals and purposes for their creation. As previously mentioned, “Lake” is about the love between a husband and wife. It deals with what it means to love someone in spite of themselves. Both characters in “Lake” have obvious flaws that make it a wonder how they ever loved each other. But the point in the story is that they do, regardless of these inherent flaws. The story also examines the question of how far do you go for love? And what it means to love someone forever. Jeremy, the main character, is willing to defy God in order to be with his beloved wife, Kate. Whether or not he is right or justified in doing so remains ambiguous. The story challenges the reader to either take an optimistic approach towards love or a more cynical view at the very end.

“Once Upon a Time” takes a look at the importance of loving oneself, before anyone else can love you. It takes a serious subject matter like the value of

self-worth and pride, and makes it more light-hearted and fun by being set in a fairy tale world. It challenges the ideals of womanhood and the expectations of loving someone else. The protagonist, Cinderella, goes on a journey to reach the realization that *she* is more important than finding a *happily ever after*. It is a conflict of man vs. self as she comes to terms with what it means to love herself first and that there is a limit to sacrificing for love. Though love is often described as tumultuous and a whirlwind of emotion, “Once Upon a Time” stresses the importance of taking control and realizing that romantic love is not necessarily better or higher than loving oneself.

“Victoria Madeline” examines the complicated inner-workings of love and the complex relationship between two sisters, Madeline and Stella. It uncovers the truth that though sometimes it seems like it has gone, love is always present with family. The story itself captures a moment in the lives of two self-absorbed sisters, who in a way have lost sight of what it means to love each other. They are both on separate paths, though they co-exist in the same space. “Victoria Madeline” is about the exact scene when their paths are forced to collide. It reinforces the fact that love—familial love—is what keeps them together and what unites them not just as sisters but as human beings.

“Escapades of a Zookeeper” is about the love that bonds friendship together. It is about the risks one takes in the name of love, and the craziness that can ensue from such a potent emotion. The story focuses on the dependency that love causes people to have, and reminds the reader that love is a double-edged sword. We can feel both safe that it is there and completely fearful that it might

be snatched away from us at any moment. “Escapades of a Zookeeper” brings to light the additional emotions that come with love—protectiveness, loyalty, confidence, and desperation to name a few. The story itself follows Malcolm, a shy zookeeper average in every way, content to let his life pass him by. It is not until the threat of losing his best friend Clive (who happens to be a squirrel monkey) that he decides to take his life into his own hands. In a way, his best friend Clive is the one who spurs him into action and draws him out of his shell. The story is about the lengths one will go for love, even to the point of kidnapping. But it is also different than the other stories in that it enforces the fact that sometimes, loving means letting go.

These stories each have their own significance in their morals and purposes and come together to explore love in all its forms. But the entire thesis itself has significance in its own right. It is groundbreaking for the author, because never before has she completed a collection of short stories—having mainly focused on scripts and unfinished novels before the Capstone Project. It is a stepping board for the author into a new medium of short fiction and is a tangible proof of the work she has accomplished while growing as a writer. By writing this thesis the author was able to utilize her knowledge from various English and scriptwriting courses, pool her experiences to imagine ulterior story plots and fictional characters, thereby culminating in a piece of work that can be read and viewed by others.