2005 First Place Personal Narrative

Love Story Fades to Black

I walk into the scene looking nonchalantly around the walls of her living room as if I’m about to say something intelligent about Monet, but I decide I’d better save it just in case we fall into an awkward silence. I highly doubt that will happen, though. After all, it’s been a long time, and we have a lot to talk about. Instead I open with something an old movie actor might say at this point. Hopefully it’s a movie where the insecure romantic gets the girl.

“What a lovely home.” Hmm. A little too daytime television, but here we go.

“Thanks,” she says in her sweet voice, but it tastes strangely bitter. Even though I’ve longed to hear it for two years, it sounds as if it could be addressed to anyone. Am I just anyone? Quiet, she’s saying something else.

“It was built in 1896.” My eyebrows rise. Hey, that’s something different. She didn’t have to add that. Maybe that’s the sort of information she saves for special people. It’s only one minute into our first conversation since I’ve been home and I’m already over-analyzing everything. I thought that was the girl’s job.

As I sink into the fluffy cream-colored sofa, I feel strangely seduced by it. Her parents never had a sofa like this. I keep a non-committal distance from where she sits with a pillow on her lap. She rests her delicate cheek on the sofa back and stretches her legs in my direction, but still inches away from mine. It’s a meaningless movement, I tell myself. We’re just actor and actress, and nothing is what I want it to seem. Just like the old days. But what does she want?

My eyes continue to survey the light blue living room. It’s her first house after moving out of the dorms. It has a unique style of architecture—the kind that I know she knows I would like. I can’t help but wish I had heard about it in letters. Of course, I didn’t hear about much in letters—either of them. I cast a quick glance at her left hand on my way to the Monet. All right. That’s what I thought.
It’s a unique house. It definitely has the potential to be hip, if not for the interior décor. Maybe hip has changed since I left? No, I know it didn’t. Not into this. The art department must have just done extensive research into college girls’ cutesy living rooms. All the required ambient artifacts are here: chick flics lined up under the television, a picture of the roommates on a good day, scented candles, a framed print of one those freaky photographs of babies dressed up as flowers. There’s a stack of blankets in the corner under which her roommates no doubt cuddle with jocks as they watch one of those awful romantic comedies. I wonder how she lives in this environment. Wait a minute. Don’t I recognize that blue and white blanket on the top?

Huh.

Oh, and there’s the token teddy bear collection in the corner. I can already see the fridge covered with inspirational magnets. I’m back.

“So you’re back. How does it feel?” She grins with those big blue innocent eyes that I was beginning to think I had only imagined. And that hair. How I’ve missed her golden hair and the way it catches lamplight like it’s doing right now. If I could freeze this frame I would stare at it until I fell asleep, and keep staring at it then. But we’re rolling, and she’s waiting for an answer.

“It’s strange!” Chuckle. Some anecdote about forgetting English. Repeat. No. No! Cut! This is all wrong. This isn’t how it happens. I had this scene all planned out. We’ve been through it a hundred times. Now she’s forgetting lines and making me forget mine. Let’s take it from the top. She’s supposed to come hug me and say… Wait, I’ll just play both parts to jog her memory.

She says, “You have no idea how much I missed you. Don’t ever leave me again.”

I say, “I’m not going anywhere. You smell nice. Hold me.”

And from there we’re supposed to just ad lib some avant-garde heart-to-heart with subtitles at about our shoulder level. But that’s not what I’m hearing. What is this? Where is this dialogue going? We’re just talking about mutual friends and more drivel about culture shock. Obviously this is going to be less of a production than I had hoped. This is the sort of material that ends up under college girls’ televisions.

I think—that is, I hope—she can see a hint of disillusionment in my eyes, which, incidentally, haven’t kept contact with hers long enough to finish a single cheesy punch line. Why is that? As I pretend to not care
about the bridal magazine on the coffee table, I hear what I hope marks the transition into a deep, Oscar-worthy second act.

“What are you thinking about?” Her girlish grin has wilted slightly, but that’s fine with me. In the old days, the really good talks never started when we smiled like cheerleader and Senior Class President. No, we were beyond that. We would arrange to meet at midnight, when the sense of sight goes to sleep, and sound and touch take over. Seeing smiles didn’t matter because we could hear and feel them.

I guess it didn’t have to be midnight; our parents would be asleep around eleven. But midnight is what it says in the script, so that’s when we met. I mean that’s when we rendezvoused. We would climb the old announcer’s tower on the practice football field that I liked to imagine was used by past generations of young lovers. We dangled our legs off the side. I always brought atmosphere music and taught her about the bands. I felt so indie. The air smelled like freshly cut grass damp from the sprinklers, but my nose could only concentrate on Tommy Girl. The fog machine whispered out wave after wave of thin grey cotton that danced around our single silhouette. We talked about the stars and what’s behind them. We dreamed about all the places in the world we would see someday. I told her about all the places I had been. I told her about Monet paintings in the Musée d’Orsay in Paris. I felt so cultured. Some nights she would move closer because she was sleepy. The next morning I would sniff my sweatshirt over and over again, and then collapse on my bed like a peasant girl in Fiddler on the Roof. Some nights I would move closer because her eyes were moist. I never hesitated to let my shirt (which I planned days in advance to wear that night) get drenched in tears and smeared with her wet kitten nose. I felt so needed. What did she cry about? As I face her now, worlds away and lifetimes later, I get the impression that those tears were over some secret she has entrusted with someone else by now. I breathe in scentless air. What has she just asked me? Oh yeah.

“I’m just thinking about this one investigator.” Now that’s Oscar-worthy.

“That’s nice. Tell me about your mission. Did you like the food?”

As I consider my answer, I come to a crossroads in this melodrama. I could choose the straight, predictable road that leads into the monologue which I have mastered in the last few days, premiering at the drive home from the airport and playing six times a day since then. Or I could charge down the cobblestone
path to the castle, gaze up to her window, and release the torrid soliloquy that has pounded from the inside of my locked heart since I saw her last. I was now in the position to single-handedly save this unpromising production with a scene audiences would always associate with unadulterated passion. Forget Jack and Rose. Forget Scarlett and Rhett. They were acting. This is the real thing.

“Hey. What are you really thinking about?”

My delay in answering must have given me away. She lowers her chin and raises her eyelashes like a starlet for which men don’t mind paying theater prices to be manipulated by. I’m going for it. I time my approach with the downbeat of the strings.

“The last night I saw you.”

Close up on her eyes. I watch her reaction to judge what image that conjures in her mind. Does she remember?

I charge on. “We talked about what the next two years would mean. And we wondered if we would just start from where we left off when I get home. I—”

“What did we mean? Where did we leave off?”

That throws off my rhythm. I try to regroup, but without momentum I sound like an after-school special.

“Basically, uh, just… like, our…friendship.” Whoa. Whoa. Cut. Please don’t interrupt me. This is no time to ad lib. Take two.

She furrows her brow so much that I can’t see any blue at all. “I really don’t remember that. What—”

The phone rings in the kitchen. “Sorry. I’ll be right back.”

What idiot forgot to unplug the phone? Clearly no one understands what it means to create an atmosphere except me. I wish I had a trailer to retreat to.

I pick up the pillow she left on the couch as she began her walk to the kitchen, which looked a bit too much like a run. As I toss it up and catch it again, my mind swimming, it hits me that this may not work tonight. Nothing is going according to plan. This could delay the “happy ever after” third act for a bit. But the question is: will it work some other night?

Or ever?
What am I saying? I’ve seen the ending! I know I’m the insecure romantic, but I can’t give up. What kind of story would that be? All this uncomfortable uncertainty only creates suspense that gets resolved in a passionate crescendo. It’s coming. I can feel it.

From the kitchen I hear a burst of laughter. My goodness, I missed that laugh. Hold on, though. I was the only person that made her laugh like that. Is it a boy? I bet it’s a boy! Great, another unexpected plot twist. Okay, what’s my plan? All right, when she comes back in she’ll ask what we had been talking about. I’ll be ready. I’ll just dissolve her mind into a flashback montage from two years ago. I’d better practice.

Remember? We talked under that blue and white blanket almost until the sun came up. When we knew it was time to say goodbye we held each other for what seemed like a hundred nights. I’ve relived it that many times, if not more. You said it was magic. I feel the same way. I want a thousand more of those nights with you.

Yeah, that’s gold. She’ll remember it all as the violins swell. She’ll get weak in the knees and sit down closer on the sofa. I’d better make some room. I wonder if she’ll reach for that blanket on the way here. Oh, here she comes. Just take a deep breath and think about the scene. Here comes her line. She’s such an angel.

“That was my friend. He’s stranded in Las Vegas. Oh my gosh, he is the funniest guy. I’m so excited that you get to meet all of my friends. There are some cute girls too,” she sings with a side glance and a knowing raised eyebrow. What does she know? Nothing. We finally keep eye contact as my jaw drops ever so slightly. My heart stops and my stomach is weak. But not in the good way.

“Heh heh. Really?” I force a swallow.

I swallow again. My dry throat scraping itself breaks the thick silence.

If we weren’t live, I would say that’s a wrap.

She sits back down exactly where she was before. Did this sofa get longer? The blanket looks back at me, shaking its head apologetically. I glance around the room again, not really focusing. I feel like the whole night is on a loop. I stare again at the painting hanging in the corner of the room—this living room that I’ve come to know so well. It must be the room. Someone in the art department is finished. How is she expected to be herself in this room? It’s nothing like I wrote in the script. None of this is.
I don’t try to find what she’s looking at, but when I rewind this scene over and over again, I’m afraid I’ll see it was the clock. I don’t know what time it is, but I know midnight is a long way away. I blink twice, swallow once. And blink again. I can hear my eyelids touching.

“That’s a beautiful Monet.”