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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE GREATEST IS LOVE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Leslie C. Taylor

2018

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Leslie C. Taylor, and entitled *The Greatest is Love*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Maneck Daruwala

Les Standiford

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: 03/01/18

The thesis of Leslie C. Taylor is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2018

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE GREATEST IS LOVE

by

Leslie C. Taylor

Florida International University, 2018

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

THE GREATEST IS LOVE is a collection of ten short stories showing the painful manifestations of romantic relationships in the lives of contemporary American characters from many walks of life.

As in the stories of D.H. Lawrence, these characters are often driven towards what may be bad for them, finding that love overrides their rational thoughts. In “The Mechanic” a woman whose legal career has left her isolated becomes irresistibly attracted to her friend’s ex-husband. Three stories center on one character, Charles, whose early failures both in college and at work lead him to become a detective, only to be tempted to betray his new calling by a woman who leads him astray.

As in Italo Calvino’s *Difficult Loves*, the stories in THE GREATEST IS LOVE combine the pain and comedy of passion. Even when it is challenging, love offers characters irresistible glimmers of hope.

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One For You

You find yourself telling the story like this: Girl meets Boy, Boy falls head over heels in love, Boy and Girl engage to marry, Girl flies off to study in a foreign land, Boy dies tragically, Girl is flying home to mourn. This is your story, and you imagine it in your head like a pay-per-view channel replaying a Nicholas Sparks movie all day.

You wake up in your father's car. He turns the engine off and declares you have arrived at home sweet home. You wonder where all this fits in the story. The house is the same as it was last time you came down. The artificial tree is still up three weeks after Christmas, which was probably due to your father forgetting and your younger brother not caring. Outside of your room, your brother hugs you. His arms wrap around you, pinning your arms against your body. You say hi, tell him it's okay to let go. He backs up, slightly ashamed of the intensity he showed.

He opens the door to your room. Before you drop your bags, you notice the change. As of Thanksgiving, there were a number of framed photos in the room: some hung up, some on your dresser or desk. All but one are gone. Only your graduation photo, shaking hands with the president of University of South Florida as he hands you a diploma, is still up. You yell out your father's first name, a sign that you are truly angry.

He comes running in. "Kay, what's wrong?"

You show him.

He shrugs and mumbles your brother's name. You turn to him. He slinks against the doorway. You demand to know where the photos are. He comes in, opens your walk-in closet, reaches up to the highest shelf much more easily than you could, and hands you a battered cardboard box filled with framed photos.

You sit heavily on the edge of the bed, the box on your lap. You want to throw one of the pictures at the jerk. Instead you demand why he would hide the photos.

“Well, Kay, I knew you loved Jared a lot. I thought it would upset you if there were all these pictures of him surrounding you since he died. I wouldn’t want to see those.”

You tell him you can handle it.

“Remember when Mom left?” he asks not accusingly but sweetly, his voice cracking a little as he says it.

Your dad shifts uncomfortably, says something about dinner, and walks out.

You remember. When your mother left ten years ago, you would cry any time you saw a photo of hers. It happened a lot that first year. One day you admitted to your father how it made you feel, so he went from room to room, searching for every scrap of her. They all went in a box that went up into the attic. He cried the entire time.

You consider yelling at your brother, but you worry that you’re about to cry, something you want to avoid. You promised yourself during the flight here that there would be no public crying till the funeral. You wanted to be like a grieving widow, not a sobbing one. You softly thank your brother for the consideration.

“Kay, are you planning on hanging out with anyone?” he asks awkwardly.

You ask why.

“Maybe it’d be better to just stay at home and relax, or you know, watch Netflix, or—”

You interrupt him and ask what his point is.

“Well, there are a lot of rumors at school about Christina and him. People are saying... they’re saying all kinds of stuff.”

This shouldn’t be surprising. The three of you went to the same high school and many of the teachers still remember your trio. But what rumors?

“It must suck for you if it’s true. The two of them.” He seems physically uncomfortable, looking down at the ground and toward the door.

He knows. You ask him who else knows. They’ve been talking about it at his school and it blew up over social media. He explains there are all kinds of theories ranging from what you suspect all the way to it being a ritual killing from the New World Order. People can be dumb, you both agree. Your father has asked your brother to not say *her* name in the house while you are home.

You thank him for the briefing, but you know you’d have felt better without it.

“Let me know if you need anything, Kay.” He walks out of the room as if on tiptoe, slowly closing the door behind him.

You look into the box of photo frames. There is a picture of Jared, Chris, and you all at the deck of Ca’D’Zan, John Ringling’s mansion, which functions now as a museum. Jared and Chris were on both sides of the frame holding their arms in the shape of a heart. You stood in the middle, making a face of faking humility, your lips perked out like a starlet. Jared looked into the camera, you looked off into the distance, and Chris had her eyes set on Jared. You should’ve known.

You drop the box onto the ground. Something cracks inside. You lie back on the sheetless bed. You decide to sleep through lunch. You’re not hungry anyway.

*

Before you leave to see the Johnsons, your brother asks if you are okay to drive. You say no, but he insists and explains he needs the practice for his permit. You reluctantly agree.

As your brother drives, you try not to reflect that you almost were a Mrs. Johnson. You are going to their son's room to retrieve items belonging to yourself. Before you flew down, you spoke to Mr. Johnson, to whom you were closer with before the accident. He admitted to you that neither of them have been able to go through the room without breaking down. You are only in town for two full days and the second day is the funeral, so this is the only chance to get any mementos or belongings before you fly back to Nebraska and your new life separated from this place.

You tell your brother to wait in the car. You're not planning on being long. He agrees, pulling out his phone to text. By the time you shut the door, his thumbs are tapping the screen rapidly. You realize he might be texting his own girlfriend or boyfriend. A deep pang hits your gut.

Their house is the same except one detail: there used to be a barn star over the garage. It's been taken down. You remember Jared getting on the ladder and helping his father put the star up. You have a feeling that a few nights ago, with a couple of whiskies in him, Jared's father took the star down.

His mother opens the door. She is a thin woman with beach blond hair that contrasts with your own heavier, earthier self. She acknowledges you visually but says nothing. You follow her inside.

In the front room, you see a wine glass and a half-drunk bottle of white on the coffee table. This is the only thing not perfect in the room. The whole house now has a feeling of cleanliness. Everything in its place, and you know this is a front. From the back living room, the sound of a vacuum cleaner rips through the quiet.

Mrs. Johnson, not Kay Johnson who you would've been, yells at Mr. Johnson, not Jared Johnson who would've been your husband. "Shut off that racket, Jerry! The girl is here."

The girl she calls you. You hate her.

The vacuum shuts off. Apologizing, Mr. Johnson comes into the room. He sees you and offers a hug. You wrap your arms around him and, for the first time in front of other people, you begin to cry. You want to apologize, but you don't know what for. Mrs. Johnson looks at you with the same distaste as she did when you would hug or kiss Jared. Mr. Johnson offers you tissues, and you start to wipe the wetness from your face. He escorts you to Jared's room.

It is just like the last time you were here, except cleaner. Jared was the careless type, often dropping clothes and books and papers in piles strewn about. This room looks more like a museum. The mess is oriented and controlled. You know his father has cleaned and arranged it to be this way. You expected an archaeological dig through an old tomb you once inhabited, but you get an exhibition of the life of Jared.