

**Reaching for a Higher Perspective: Exploring Elements of Multiple Perspectives in
Literature and Writing**

A Thesis Submitted to
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Abstract

In three parts, this thesis for the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing dives into perspective in writing and in life. After a statement from the author, the critical essay defines and analyzes a craft used in fiction novels: writing from multiple perspectives. First, the author describes the three basic perspectives and their uses in fiction writing. Next, a history of the development of multiple points of view leads the reader from ancient epics to modern novels. Finally, the author's analysis of William Faulkner's novel, *As I Lay Dying*, gleans a broader understanding of writing clearly and effectively from multiple points of view in a novel. The final section, a novella-length fiction piece, presents a fantasy town from two different perspectives. Using craft elements of time and perspective shifts, the author explores themes of faith, love, and friendship through a unique fictional lens.

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A Final Test: God's Grace and Guidance to the End

The split-second decision to declare English as my major in college was the butterfly effect that unraveled to my present situation. As I learned to write, I had no idea it would ever be a career. From a young age, the pages of my notebooks bore the scribbled beginnings of many stories. Unfortunately, the passionate spark of each narrative would be slowly extinguished when my young mind realized the reality of the vast time and work necessary to complete a novel. The first chapter or so of every story I began to tell is a flame that will remain unkindled. Truth be told, following through on anything has never been one of my strengths; my desk drawers are filled with hobbies that never turned into skills.

I did not have a choice in one accomplishment, which is the reason I finished high school. Anything other than success was not an option, which is an attitude that followed me through college. I completed my undergraduate degree in four years, even if I might have learned more in a less stressful environment. In 2020, I should have walked across the stage to receive my Bachelor of English degree. Instead, the degree arrived in the mail at my parents' house while everyone was in quarantine. The year of lockdown taught us all to slow down a little, and that is a lesson I had taken to heart when I began my classes for my Master's degree. I have not rushed through these classes, and I have grown and practiced my writing enough to see exactly where I need to continue to grow and practice. Now, approaching the final project, I am excited for the opportunity to practice my follow-through and finally complete a creative piece that I am passionate about.

As a child, I voraciously devoured books, finding solace and adventure within their pages. However, as life grew busier, my love for literature waned, succumbing to the alluring,

yet mind-numbing scroll of social media and YouTube. For years, I read only when I was required to take a quiz in school, so reading became a tiring task rather than a source of entertainment. Later, during my college years, I was also only reading for assignments, but I started to look forward to the reading rather than dread it. Studying the story and craft of novels under passionate teachers quickly grew my passion for great writing. I long to get lost in the vast world of meaning that the meticulous choice of words can weave into a sentence. Since college, I find myself reluctant to explore anything but the literary classics that have withstood the test of time. I scour the shelves of every secondhand bookstore, accumulating a collection that has outgrown my bookshelf. Letting go of books, for me, is simply not an option. Studying and enjoying the works of great writers, I can aspire to become a great writer myself. I have discovered that my best writing blossoms forth after consuming the literary brilliance of figures like Hawthorne, Faulkner, Lewis, Cather, Fitzgerald, and other illustrious figures who have left an indelible mark on the world of literature.

However, it is not only through the influence of renowned authors that I have been guided in this project. The path to completing even a single class for this thesis would have been impossible without the strength and grace bestowed upon me by God. Staring at a blank thesis application screen, I felt a moment of panicked uncertainty until I turned to God. Ideas had been floating around my mind, but immediately after I looked to God for help everything began to fall into place. I started to imagine a transformation of a short story from my Fiction Workshop class into a novella-length work, and a critical research paper to supplement it. The seed of this idea took root while watching *The Good Place*, as the time and narrative techniques employed in the show sparked an idea for a shift in perspective and a literary trip through time that I have yet to encounter in other works of literature. Intrigued by this concept, my critical thesis will delve into

the history, usage, and effectiveness of shifting perspective and time in fiction, with Faulkner's experimental perspective usage serving as the focal point of my analysis. I am driven by a dual purpose: to unravel the intricacies of this technique and to acquire the necessary skills to effectively employ it in my own writing.

As I embark on this complex thesis project, I am reminded of the journey that led me to this precipice of degree completion. Throughout my life God has blessed me in unimaginable ways as I struggled with life and faith. In high school and college, I faced the often illogical grip of anxiety and depression despite my Christian upbringing in a loving home. God continuously guided me, even through my mistakes, until I could see that He was working tirelessly to shape me into a more resilient and well-rounded individual. It is this profound experience of divine grace and guidance that I seek to capture and reflect upon in my creative writing piece.

In the creative portion of my thesis, I plan to weave a narrative that encapsulates the profound influence of God's guidance in our lives. The characters that inhabit this story are recipients of His divine intervention, and their experiences serve as a testament to the intricate workings of God's plan. This allegorical tale aims to illuminate the often-forgotten promise from Romans 8:28 (KJV), which declares that "All things work together for good." As a Christian, it is easy to lose sight of this ultimate promise of goodness amidst the trials and tribulations of life. Through vivid character development and a whimsical setting, I endeavor to remind readers that God's reward is always worth the wait.

The central figures of this narrative are Lionel and Vera, two individuals who are unmistakably destined for each other. As I delve into their past experiences and present struggles, I will showcase the transformative lessons they have learned on their separate paths. The story's three-part structure will unfold through the perspectives of Vera, Lionel, and eventually converge

upon their shared experiences. Vera's morning will begin the narrative, then a shift in time and perspective will occur, seamlessly transporting the reader back to the story's opening morning and unveiling the intricacies of Lionel's character as the day unfolds.

God, in this narrative, is represented by an obscure yet powerful Matchmaker, an embodiment of His plan for our lives. Through symbolism and metaphor, I aim to capture the grace, wisdom, and unwavering presence of God as He orchestrates events behind the scenes, gently nudging the characters toward their ultimate destinies. The allegorical nature of this work allows me to delve into the depths of faith, exploring the complexities of our relationship with God and the transformative power of surrendering to His guidance.

Through this creative piece, I intend to create a reading experience that not only entertains but also provokes introspection and contemplation. The characters' personal growth, their resilience in the face of adversity, and their eventual alignment with God's plan serve as a reflection of the human journey and the profound impact that trust in a higher power can have on our lives.

Partaking in this creative endeavor has been an exhilarating and challenging experience. It has demanded a deep understanding of the human condition, an eye for storytelling, and a willingness to surrender to the creative process. As I develop the narrative arc, dialogue, and intricate plot details, I remain acutely aware of the importance of clear transitions when shifting perspectives, the distinctiveness of character voices, and the seamless integration of the overarching theme into the fabric of the story.

In an effort to understand more about what will be necessary for comfortable reader transitions, I am undertaking a critical analysis that explores the utilization of perspective and time shifts in literature. To illuminate this exploration, I have chosen to study the works of one of

the most influential American authors of the twentieth century, William Faulkner. Specifically, I will closely examine Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*, delving into the ways in which he employs these narrative techniques effectively or not.

Faulkner's experimental approach to perspective and time shifts provides a rich foundation for my research. His novels often exhibit a mosaic-like structure, fragmented narratives, and multiple points of view. I will explore how he navigates clear transitions between different perspectives, employs stark contrast in character dialogue to establish distinct voices, and leverages these shifts to reflect overarching themes within the story.

My research will not be confined solely to Faulkner's works. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical and literary context, I will engage with secondary sources that explore the evolution of narrative techniques over time. I am relying on established authors and concrete sources for my research. The best teachers have achieved success in their field, so any post-millennium authors I have used have multiple published books and recognition for that writing. I have also tracked down early writing about perspective that is still cited today, trusting that time-tested sources are reliable in a field with a deep history like literature. Finally, I have picked some encyclopedia sources for definitions and the historic development of perspective through history. By tracing the timeline of literature, I intend to elucidate how authors have pushed the boundaries of traditional storytelling, paving the way for writers like Faulkner to freely experiment with perspective and time shifts.

Through this research, I aspire to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on narrative techniques, expanding the discourse on perspective shifts in literature. By examining the effectiveness of Faulkner's approach and drawing insights from other influential authors, I aim to deepen my own understanding of these techniques and their potential application in my

creative work. I will assess how Faulkner uses unique character voices effectively, but also adds many details that distract from the balance of immersion and reward within a novel. When modern readers can choose any book, a story must capture and maintain interest from the beginning. Through my analysis of the uses of perspective and Faulkner's twists of traditional perspective presentation, I aim to present an argument about how to successfully balance confusing or experimental techniques with reader-friendly writing techniques. Every article I read is information I can file away in my mind for future use, and any quotation I analyze will contribute to my knowledge of writing. Aspects of perspective that I had never imagined before now seem like wide avenues for literary experimentation. Bending or breaking literary expectations and conventions successfully is one way to achieve a now elusive literary fame. Despite Faulkner's at times confusing craft techniques, I still find myself with satisfaction and heightened emotions at the completion of the novel. What gives his writing that spark that has lasted through the years? I hope this analysis will uncover his literary secrets and also reveal how I can improve his techniques for a modern audience. This research has changed the way I look at writing, and I hope I can communicate that learning through my critical paper.

This final learning and research opportunity will only add to the exponential growth I have experienced since my first Graduate class. Since embarking on this degree, I have undergone a remarkable journey of personal growth and development as a writer. During my undergraduate years, I grappled with uncertainties about the quality of my writing. However, the workshop classes I have taken as part of this degree have been transformative, offering a platform for growth, self-discovery, and comparison. Through these workshops, I have been able to engage with fellow writers at my level, receive constructive feedback, and refine my skills

through continuous practice. As a result, my writing has evolved, becoming more refined, nuanced, and confident.

Of course, the journey toward higher education can include hurdles. One significant challenge that I have overcome throughout my classes is meeting deadlines and completing assignments in a timely manner. Time management and discipline were areas where I initially struggled, but I am proud to say that I have developed the necessary skills to conquer these obstacles. Through careful planning, organization, and a commitment to prioritizing my writing, I have demonstrated my ability to deliver high-quality work within set deadlines. This newfound discipline has not only positively impacted my academic pursuits but has also spilled over into other areas of my life, fostering a sense of responsibility and perseverance. I cannot take full credit for this focus though. I notice a significant increase in energy, motivation, and productivity when I start my day with a humble plea for God's grace throughout the day. I know I would be nowhere without His constant uplifting hand.

Throughout this degree, my passion for literature and the written word has been reignited. As a child, I voraciously consumed books, finding solace and inspiration within their pages. However, as life grew busier, my reading habits waned. Nevertheless, college presented me with invaluable opportunities to rekindle my love for literature. Exploring the vast world of meaning encapsulated within a sentence, I discovered the power of well-chosen words and the beauty of literary classics. With limited time available for reading, I have become discerning in my choices, eagerly scanning the shelves of every bookstore and Goodwill for names and titles I recognize. My passion for reading great writers has become intertwined with my aspiration to become a great writer myself.

In this journey, my faith has played a pivotal role. Looking back, I can see how God used hardships to shape me into an adult that can begin to face the world with confidence. I am thankful for the challenges of my life. Every choice I have made has led me to this point in my life. Without every lesson God has taught me, where would I be? I grew as a person during my undergraduate degree, but I know I could have achieved more academically in the four years I was meant to be focusing on school. This graduate degree provided the opportunity I needed to gain clarity in grammar, practice my own writing, and read influential writing. I am unsure of exactly what God plans for me to do with this degree, but no matter where it takes me, I am thankful for the experience.

Looking ahead, my aspirations as a writer extend beyond the completion of this thesis. I believe the ultimate show of respect for an author is to be analyzed by a teacher with her students. While the goal of having my work studied in classrooms may seem lofty, it serves as a driving force, spurring me to continuously read attentively and write constantly. As I read the words of extremely talented writers, a fire burns in my soul to share my own stories. I have improved my writing and my time management, and I hope to channel that into novels of my own. However, even if none of my work does not achieve any level of recognition, my ultimate desire is to glorify God through my writing. Fame and fortune is not the true prize, reaching even one person with the Truth would be enough of a reward for any time I spent on the book.

The creation of this allegorical piece, with God as a central yet enigmatic character, presents a complex and challenging endeavor. However, with His guidance, I remain steadfast in my commitment to complete this story and share it with the world. I do not believe that I alone am capable of communicating the story that God wants me to share, so I begin each writing experience with a prayer. I hope for the finished piece to be as entertaining as it is enlightening.

Though I doubt my own abilities, I am confident that God has prepared me for this project, and because of His grace, any success is not mine, but straight from the Lord.

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A Change in Perspective: Writing Effectively with Multiple Points of View

Introduction

A great story told from the wrong perspective becomes a missed opportunity. For that reason, each writer must analyze his goals for a narrative to determine the best perspective to effectively tell that story. Over the years, literary geniuses have drawn outside the lines of basic point of view (or POV) to accomplish goals like creating a deeper connection with the reader or a more straightforward plot. Grade-school students learn the basic first, second, and third person points of view, but experienced writers can dive into a deep sea of twists on POV.

Even after studying the definitions and uses of each perspective, trying to maintain one perspective throughout an entire novel is a difficult task. Despite the challenge, some authors desire to represent complex ideas by employing multiple perspectives. Diving deep into the consciousness of only one mind cannot always channel every complexity of the narrative effectively; therefore, using only one perspective throughout an entire novel is not always sufficient. A studying writer may be passionate about which perspectives are necessary in his novel, but also intimidated by the challenges each perspective can present. In the face of intimidation, a skilled learner will invest time into improving his writing to gain confidence with a given skill. One way to work toward building skill with writing techniques is by learning from those who have already traversed the landscape. Relevant examples provide a basis to learn and grow in many areas, but they are especially important in the experimental arena of literature.

Looking back at authors who have used multiple points of view in their novels will allow an author to learn from the past.

In experimental literature, William Faulkner's name stands out. He is known for using new techniques like stream of consciousness narration, unique narrative structure, and complex perspective presentations in many of his books. His 1930 novel, *As I Lay Dying* contains examples of each of these uncommon literary techniques. In this novel, Faulkner takes the reader on a journey with the Bundren family as they transport their mother's coffin to be buried in her hometown. He uses many different first person perspectives to convey this complicated tale of a disconnected family. By studying Faulkner's craft in this novel, a writer can make better decisions on what to include or exclude from his own multi-POV novel.

In the swirling sea of possible perspectives, how can a writer know that multiple POVs are best for his story? Once he knows, how can he manage to write that story? And what should he keep in mind to create a readable novel? In this essay, I will define point of view, delve into the history of experimentation with multiple points of view, and analyze Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* to glean effective techniques for writing from more than one perspective.

Definitions and Uses

Defining perspective begins with the birth of stories themselves. Long before anything was written down, stories were told aloud and spread orally. Stories like *Beowulf* have no attributed author because the story had spread far wider than the original creator before it was written down. When someone decided it was important to preserve the story, no one knew who the first to tell it had been. When oral stories were written down, the voice of the story-teller remained in the words, creating the narrator (Foley). Every story must come from somewhere

and be told by someone or something. The voice that is relaying the story to the audience is called the narrator. Monika Fludernik is an author often cited in writing about perspective. In her article “Point of View,” which appears in the *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Language Sciences*, she defines the article’s title term, writing that point of view (also known as perspective), “refers to textual strategies that provide the reader with the illusion of seeing things ‘through the eyes of a character.’” POV is how an author presents the way a speaker and a reader interact. Whether that is a common and basic usage of the technique or pushing the known boundaries, every story has a perspective.

The author of the book of Ecclesiastes explores life’s theme that there is nothing new under the sun. Even in the face of that fact, writers have made attempts to present a new take on basic perspectives. The concept of point of view is commonly taught in English classes, but to write perspective from scratch becomes more complicated the more one ponders and studies the topic. Not only are there three points of view to choose from, but combinations and twists on the basic forms. Fludernik comments on the variety of views writers at the time held, “For Lubbock (1921), Jean Pouillon (1946), and Norman Friedman (1955), the term, by contrast, comprises not one technique of focusing the narrative through a central character’s mind but a variety of three (Pouillon) to eight (Friedman) alternative points of view that authors can choose.” Because perspective is subjective, not all scholars agree about what is included in the definition. Especially within the third person point of view, the line between the narrator and the characters begins to defy definition.

A term that some of these grammarians introduce is focalization. In the *Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory (ELCT)*, Heather Steffen distinguishes perspective from focalization: “That which speaks or tells a story is the narrator, and it should not be confused

with the perspective from which the events, situations, and characters are viewed, which he [Gérard Genette] called ‘focalization.’ Focalization describes only the perceptual position from which the story is related, regardless of who is narrating those perceptions for the reader.”

Steffen makes the distinction between an intimate narrator who is a character in the story, or an unobtrusive narrator who is only observing. When an author is picking through to find the best perspective for his novel, a concept that seems elementary on the surface can become a bigger beast when in practice. The great human imagination can always manage to twist the basics to be unrecognizable; but most points of view can be related back to first, second, or third person perspectives.

The most reasonable place to start definitions is with the first person perspective. The three perspectives are most easily distinguished through the pronouns the author uses. First person carries the idea of a primary research source. A story in first person is told directly from the mind and eyes, the thoughts, of a character. That character refers to himself in the first person, using pronouns like *I*, *me*, *we*, and *us*. First person pronouns are the clue that immediately tells the reader that the story is written as if that character is speaking directly to him. This technique in writing creates a sense of conversational intimacy between the reader and the character. People are constantly listening to their own first person perspective when they speak and think, so that perspective is extremely familiar and natural in writing. Rosenfeld elaborates, “When you write from the pronoun *I*, readers get to feel as though they are inside your viewpoint character’s perspective” (91). The familiar nature of the first person voice is what creates a sense of unity with that main character. First person narration is useful for that immediate reader-character connection, but it also contributes to the overall function of the story as well. When the thoughts are communicated from the eyes of someone experiencing the events,

the reader sees the thoughts and emotions directly from that character. Fludernik reveals that a possible negative of first person perspective is that “it only allows the reader access to the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of one character in the story.” However, prominent literary critic and author, Percy Lubbock, in his book *The Craft of Fiction* counters that downside, saying, “The loss of freedom is more than repaid by the more salient effect of the picture” (para. 128). To this author, the first person perspective more effectively and easily creates the narrative or central image of a novel, and that makes up for the limited knowledge of just one first person narrator. Another way an author can account for the closed perspective of the first person POV is to have more than one first person narrator throughout the novel, if he can manage those perspectives while keeping the reader entertained. An author may choose first person narration if he wants the story to be emotionally gripping and character driven. Many authors have mastered the classic first person present-tense narrator or adapted it with great success.

Some common twists on the basic storytelling first person perspective include a narrator who is recalling events from the past, stream of consciousness, or an unreliable narrator. First person perspective could follow a person narrating their story in real time as they experience it. However, the real-time first person method is necessarily one step from reality. Who is the character talking to? Simply the concept of narration breaks a wall between the character and the reader. Some authors have attempted to remedy this lack of realism by giving the narration a purpose. The main character could be telling the story to someone at a party, like in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, or writing a letter or diary, as in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s most well-known novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald’s novel is still widely read today due in part to his innovative use of perspective. The narrator, Nick, is writing down his experience to create the very book the reader holds, bringing together narrative and reality.

Fitzgerald created a purpose for the first person narration to be taking place and effectively connects the reader's world to the novel's world. Writing a story from the future is one twist on the basic form of first person perspective, but Fitzgerald is also a poster-child for another clever use for the technique. By definition, the reader must trust the word of a first person narrator, but what if the narrator is not reliable? Fitzgerald uses a lonely man enamored with the opulence of his neighbor to show us an image tainted by his grand opinion of Gatsby. There is no way for the reader to know if the retelling of the story was truth or fantasy. The unreliable narrator brings doubt and speculation into the story, which leaves the reader room to think and contemplate what was actually the truth. First person perspective brings a reader into a story in a way the other perspectives cannot quite match. Finally, as later analyzed for techniques of changing perspective effectively, William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* displays another common take on the first person perspective, stream of consciousness. Faulkner is one of the most well-known authors to experiment with stream of consciousness. This technique mimics the way a person thinks; the narration will be somewhat disjointed and random like the often disorganized thought in one's mind. Fludernik comments that the events in a novel with stream of consciousness narration are "related as they filter into and impact this flow of thought, giving a radical sense of immediacy to the narrative and often demanding a fragmented or aleatory presentation of events." This twist on the first person perspective dives deep into the mind of a person. It values realism and relatability over concision and simplicity. For many of the above reasons, the stream of consciousness technique can be difficult to master successfully. Whether thinking or writing, the first person narrator offers a close look at the mind of the characters an author wants to build, be that trustworthy or untrustworthy. First person perspective provides a close look into a character's thoughts, but it is less personal than second person.

Some authors have experimented with second person perspective to limited success. If you imagine one person talking directly to another person, aloud or in writing, you are thinking in a second person perspective. The two people involved in that scene stand for the namesake, second person perspective. The *you* pronoun is a telltale sign of second person perspective. That pronoun in and of itself implies that *I* am talking to *you*. Creative writer Jordan Rosenfeld examines point of view in her book *Writing the Intimate Character*, where she points out, “It bypasses the conceit that the character is narrating to an audience— instead, the audience is the character” (127). Almost inevitably, the reader is acting as the direct audience of the speaker. Certainly a creative author could come up with a novel written in second person POV which does not include the reader. Suppose the *you* in question is a person thinking about himself in his own brain, but then, does the reader have the power to read minds? Certainly, in fiction anything is possible, but it requires the reader to constantly be willing to imagine that he is reading the thoughts of a character thinking to and about himself. Again, think back to Coleridge’s willing suspension of disbelief; the second person narrator requires the reader to be more aware of the narrative and less able to lose himself in it. The ELCT comments, “Sustained use of second-person narration calls attention to the act of narration itself, and for this reason is found in postmodern novels” (Steffen). A writer can rarely predict what the reader is doing at the time he sits down with the novel, so the second person point of view whether it includes the reader as a character or not is a distraction.

Second person perspective is a powerful tool in certain situations. Many writers say it is even more intimate than first person perspective (Rosenfeld 91, 127). It can trigger more empathy in the reader through the usage of direct address, which makes the reader feel like they are being spoken to. When the reader is essentially a character in the novel, the events are vivid

as if happening to the reader directly. However, it is not as natural as telling or listening to a story. It is not often that someone has to tell another person a story about himself, and in that case, the person cannot be the reader. For that reason, the second person can be distracting and confusing in a full-length novel; but for the exact same reasons, it is a great technique to catch a reader's attention or force the reader to put himself in the character's shoes. Though it is tricky to accomplish successfully, the rarity of second person perspective makes the technique perfect for an author who wants to experiment with a unique perspective. The intimate nature of second and first person is only championed by the flexibility of third person perspective.

The final perspective, third person, is essentially like a narrator or a camera observing the scene from a third location. If one were to imagine and describe a scene of two characters, he would be the third person in that scene, creating the third person perspective. An author using this perspective can choose which characters, if any, have thoughts and feelings that are known to the narrator. Lubbock writes that an author could write like a camera which only sees observable actions, "but this is rare; such restraint is burdensome, unless in a very compact and straightforward tale. Somewhere the author must break into the privacy of his characters and open their minds to us" (para. 74). The length of a novel adds a need for connection with the reader, so divulging the thoughts and feelings of characters builds the connection a reader needs to willingly continue reading. An omniscient narrator is one way the author can reveal the thoughts and feelings of any character. Whenever the author desires to divulge information, the omniscient narrator can. The omniscient narrator can be anywhere in the setting, and he can report the thoughts and feelings of any character. For this reason, the ELCT explains that omniscient narrators are usually "not characters in the narrative, as their privileged access to others' minds would make this implausible" (Steffen). This technique can accommodate a broad

cast of characters, allowing the writer to develop many characters beyond a surface depth. The omniscient narrator places the author in a god-like position. The author can reveal whatever he wants whenever he wants because the narrator is omniscient. Of course, with great power comes great responsibility. Each character must be carefully individualized, the omniscient narrator gives the writer the power to include all the best parts—but also all the worst. An author using this technique must be attentive to which details are absolutely necessary to the story so it is not weighed down by unnecessary information. The omniscient narrator provides an author and a reader unprecedented access to the minds of characters.

Another take on the third person perspective is a limited narrator. This narrator can only see into the feelings of one character at a time. The limited perspective requires an author to be more careful of the viewpoint of the current character. The limited narrator can only describe the words and actions of most characters. One character at a time will be the focal, or point of view, character. While this character does not speak directly, the narrator is privy to the focal character's thoughts and feelings and describes the world as according to those internal signs. With this perspective, an author should be aware of jumping from one character's perspective to another. In his article, "All about Perspective in Novels," best-selling author Nathan Bransford writes, "Head jumping means you have to constantly re-contextualize whose perspective you're seeing the events from and constantly re-evaluate your understanding of a scene." An author writing from the perspective of a limited narrator must be careful with perspective relevant elements of the story. For example, in a story about a family, the father's perspective would likely include all of the first names of the family, whereas the child's perspective would use parental titles rather than names. The third person limited perspective requires a detailed approach, but it also creates dramatic irony unlike the other perspectives. In one chapter, the

reader sees the actions and hears the words of many characters, but only the thoughts and feelings of one person. Then, in the next chapter, he could get a closer look into the mind of a different character who reveals new information or does not know something the reader knows. The author has the opportunity to explore the character's opinions of each other and how those thoughts play into the events of the story. Dramatic irony builds naturally as one focal character lets the reader in on information while other characters are still unaware. Percy Lubbock analyzes Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*, emphasizing the dramatic effect of changing perspective: "Charles must be held in readiness, so to speak, for these last pages; his inner mind, and his point of view, must be created in advance and kept in reserve, so that the force of the climax, when it is reached, may be instantly felt" (para. 91). Third person limited perspective allows the author to use a well-written and well-timed shift in perspective to emphasize the emotions of one character or create a dramatic turning point. Both third person limited and omniscient perspectives give the author a unique power to hold back or reveal information.

The third person perspective provides the most options for how to handle perspective. For that reason, it can also be tricky to master in a novel. An author must choose which perspective is best for his novel and keep its nuances in mind. Aside from the necessary attention to detail of third person point of view, it allows the reader to naturally transition between characters. Character voice in a first-person perspective shift is extremely important as no two characters think alike. However, a narrator can have a common tone in third person as long as the characters are distinct. Bransford comments, "With first person and third person limited, it's difficult to show things happening outside of your character's eyesight." The three types of perspective leave authors with endless opportunity. Just thinking of a rare perspective can begin the foundations of an entire story. What story would necessitate first person plural pronouns? Why is

the narrator speaking in second person? What if the narrator could see all thoughts and feelings at once? One beautiful aspect of literature is the ability to stretch its accepted boundaries. What is completely unknown today could be commonplace before long. At one point, perspective was not nearly as broad as it is today, but thanks to innovative authors experimenting, modern authors have more concepts to play with in the sandbox of a novel.

Historical Origins

In the early stages of literature, storytelling primarily took the form of oral traditions, where tales were passed down through generations. The stories were recounted by the storyteller, infusing them with their unique voice and perspective (Leubering). Multiple perspectives would have been unusual in this context since the speaker was physically present. Later, when written language emerged, the voice of the storyteller was naturally preserved within the words themselves. Fludernik records, “The strategies of point of view narration are of fairly recent date. They came into existence as part of the shift toward increasingly subjective literary narratives near the end of the nineteenth century, and document authors’ attempts to portray characters’ individuality not merely in the rendering of idiosyncratic dialogue (for instance, in dialect) but also in the extensive depiction of characters’ minds or consciousness.” Basic literary techniques were developed early in writing, but later authors wanted to stretch the expectations of the classic works, which expanded accepted literary craft to commonly present more than one point of view. Before that experimentation could happen, literature began to develop from early storytelling to the vast literary canon known today.

The earliest written narratives were often presented from the unintrusive third person perspective, as an observer recounting events. The ELCT points out that the unobtrusive narrator

is “Now felt to be a rather old-fashioned technique” (Steffen). For example, ancient epics, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer adopt this distant narrative stance, providing an omniscient view of the events transpiring. Notice the third person narrator who can peek into the internal world of groups and individuals in the *Iliad*: “Beloved of Jove, Achilles! would'st thou know / Why angry Phoebus bends his fatal bow?” (Homer 10). The first chapter of this epic demonstrates the omniscient narrator that will present the rest of the narrative. Here, the narrator knows the feelings of God himself (Jove), he speaks metaphorically to Achilles, and he also reveals the emotions of Phoebus as well. These elements are unique to this style of narrator who is all-knowing yet totally removed from the action of the story. This style enthralls the reader because the narrator is in a position of unlimited knowledge and power, making it a totally different experience from real life. The narrator is personally involved, knowing the thoughts of every character, yet remains objective. Third person omniscient POV is the least restrictive, and it makes sense that the earliest stories focused on the story itself rather than testing the limits of narrative techniques. The author is essentially the narrator, making this the most basic technique.

As literature progressed, authors began to experiment with multiple perspectives. The concept of the unreliable narrator made its appearance, challenging the notion that the narrator should be a reliable source of information and limiting his power. One notable example is Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* from the 14th century. Chaucer fathered the multi-perspective novel as each character in the tale offers his or her own perspective on the journey to Canterbury. While Chaucer's voice is presented in first person, some of the stories throughout still have a third person narrator. One well-known story from the collection, “The Pardoner's Tale,” showcases both first person perspective and an unreliable narrator. Though his story is about the love of money, the Pardoner reveals, “But let me briefly make my purpose

plain; I preach for nothing but for greed of gain” (Chaucer 292). The reader knows to doubt any lessons from the Pardoner based solely on his career, but he goes as far as to directly state his selfish intentions. The character speaking adds figurative meaning and depth to this story. Chaucer pushed forward the craft of perspective with the many viewpoints presented in his classic tales. He weaved several different variations on basic POV into his poetic tale. As one of the earliest uses of multiple perspectives in a book, Chaucer’s changing perspectives are very similar to basic dialogue. By recording exactly the story that the character is telling, it is like a lengthy speech stated by a character. Each character’s story could be presented in quotation marks rather than chapter changes and the effect would be the same. His techniques show how perspective is natural and easy to shift in order to accommodate a story easily. With so many characters, the perspective Chaucer presents is not tied to the theme or carefully crafted, but instead a basic take on a story with many characters. He likely had nothing to compare his writing to, so his tale is a building block for authors whose goal is to stretch and experiment with techniques.

The Renaissance era witnessed the emergence of first person perspective as a powerful narrative tool. Renowned works like *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe employ the first person perspective to provide an intimate connection between the reader and the main character. This technique allowed readers to experience the events and emotions firsthand, immersing themselves in the story. In contrast to Chaucer, the first person perspective carries throughout the entire novel. In order to rebel against the realism of the Puritan era and the Neoclassical era, Romantic authors began to dive into the supernatural, emotional, and introspective areas of life. Defining the era, J. E. Luebering writes in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Romanticism is a way of thinking that values the individual over the group, the subjective over the objective, and a

person's emotional experience over reason." Applying the first person voice to an entire work of fiction allowed an author to create an intimate character who speaks to the reader like a confidant of his own inner musings. Using more than one first person point of view can dive deep into the psyche of more than one character. The Romantic exploration of emotions and thoughts was a great influence on modern authors' experimentation with perspectives to capture introspection in the best way possible.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the epistolary novel gained popularity. Epistolary novels like *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, consisted of a collection of letters or diary entries, providing an intimate and personal insight into the characters' thoughts and feelings (Gottlieb). This form of storytelling emphasized the subjective nature of perspective, allowing readers to engage directly with the characters' inner worlds. Taking influence from Chaucer's unreliable narrator and bringing the first and second person perspectives closer to reality, the epistolary novel shows how old ideas have been influencing the next generation of writers throughout history. Oregon State University Professor of British Literature, Evan Gottlieb, writes about the usage of letters in writing, explaining, "These gave readers a chance to hear from characters in their own voices, adding realism and psychological insight, and they usually advance the plot as well." Including a familiar object like a letter into a narrative can bring a fresh perspective and voice into a regular novel, but a different idea altogether is an entire novel made of letters. Switching between many letters is the same concept as switching perspective in a novel with a narrative POV. A book with letters from more than one person is essentially a novel with multiple POVs using both first and second person. The fragmented narrative presentation of epistolary novels opened the gate wider for authors to use multiple perspectives. .

The nineteenth century also saw the rise of the omniscient narrator, exemplified by authors like Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* and Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. These authors had a wealth of literature to consider when thinking of their own place in the literary canon. Being able to look back at previous literature gave authors like Austen room to stretch what had become expected of literature. The omniscient narrator had the ability to delve into the thoughts and emotions of multiple characters, providing a panoramic view of the story's events. This narrative technique allowed for the exploration of complex social dynamics and societal issues. While very similar to early omniscient narrators, these novels developed more of a connection with the character. While Homer's narrator hovered above events and reported what was needed about the characters, it was more like an empathetic camera. The nineteenth century omniscient narrator is written from the perspective of a character. This issue highlights the slight difference between POV and perspective. While an author can choose to write an entire book in third person omniscient perspective, she can still explore many characters' points of view. In this excerpt from Austen's *Emma* demonstrates the transition from the eyes of Emma to the eyes of Mr. Knightley:

Emma could not forgive her;—but as neither provocation nor resentment were discerned by Mr. Knightley, who had been of the party, and had seen only proper attention and pleasing behaviour on each side, he was expressing the next morning, being at Hartfield again on business with Mr. Woodhouse, his approbation of the whole; not so openly as he might have done had her father been out of the room, but speaking plain enough to be very intelligible to Emma. He had been used to think her unjust to Jane, and had now great pleasure in marking an improvement (164).

This omniscient perspective allows the narrator to have a first person style viewpoint with the scope and flexibility of a narrator. Notice how Austen gracefully transitions from Emma's thoughts to Knightley's by focusing on a party they both went to. The thoughts of both characters are presented in this excerpt. Both are in third person perspective, but both Emma and Knightley's

POVs are shown. The distinction between perspective and point of view is very minor, but it gives authors more freedom than ever to dive into any point of view while maintaining a consistent perspective. This key difference emerged as authors worked with multiple perspectives in novels.

Finally, the modernist movement of the early twentieth century brought forth a wave of experimentation with narrative perspective. Authors like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner pushed the boundaries of point of view with the purpose of changing literary conventions. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* employed a stream of consciousness perspective, offering an unfiltered glimpse into the characters' thoughts. Joyce's *Ulysses* utilized multiple perspectives and fragmented narrative structures to capture the intricacies of human consciousness. Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* employed shifts in time and perspective to depict the disintegration of a family. Each of these authors looked back at the literary canon and made a decision to flout those traditions in favor of innovation. Faulkner, one of the most prolific experimental authors of this time, was the master of using many points of view in his novels.

Today, authors have a vast array of narrative tools and perspectives at their disposal. The evolution of point of view in literature has opened up new possibilities for storytelling, allowing authors to delve into the intricacies of human experience in new and exciting ways. Perspective and the study of techniques related to it have been around since the birth of stories, but the way an author uses multiple points of view has been influenced by many different types of writing through the years. Classical first person narration from many characters like Chaucer writes, or letters from different points of view provided such as the epistolary novel paved the way for a natural transition for authors to bring a more imaginative idea of POV to their writing. Of course, the simple single perspective has accomplished amazing literary feats, but mastering multiple

points of view in a novel broadens the vast universe that can be communicated in a book. Using more than one person to convey a story provides opportunities and challenges alike.

Critical Analysis

Perspective is easy to experiment with in poetry or short fiction, but the length of a novel requires commitment from a reader. In order to keep a reader interested, the author needs to earn that commitment. A well-known author could push the boundaries more and still have readers willing to muddle through anything he writes, but a beginner needs to grab a reader from the first page, and not let go until the end. If a reader is confused and distracted, then he cannot employ Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" (208). The imaginative Romantic era author uses this term in *Biographia Literaria* to describe his goals for his and Wordsworth's planned book of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*. Coleridge wanted to write about the romantic and supernatural, so his writing will require the reader to understand that he is reading fiction and choose to believe the logic of this narrative setting is different from the logic of the reader's reality. A good writer can skillfully work perspective shifts into his novel without distracting the reader, thus maintaining the reader's ability to suspend his disbelief. Despite an author's attempts to keep a reader's attention, long-form prose expects more from the reader. A novel must keep the reader reading *and* returning. The last thing an author wants is for someone to begin his book and put it down, not because of the story, but because of confusion and frustration with the writing. It may be easiest for an author to use all sorts of perspectives throughout his book, but he also has to consider what the reader will be experiencing.

Changing perspectives in a novel can build a vivid and well-developed story. It can also be confusing and frustrating for the reader. What literary techniques make the difference between a successful switch and an unsuccessful one? William Faulkner experimented a great deal with

perspective in many of his books. He was certainly an author who attempted to push the boundaries of how stories were traditionally told. His novel, *As I Lay Dying* tells a story mostly in the first person, but from fifteen different people's perspectives. The story Faulkner unfolds could probably be summarized in a paragraph, but through the convoluted points of view of so many different people, he draws everything out into a dramatized rollercoaster, often leaving the reader flailing for context. For that reason, this book is polarizing for many readers. Those who enjoy being part of the hunt, like a detective starting a case, will enjoy piecing together the sporadic details of the story, while others may find the structure to be confusing, frustrating, and disorienting. Bransford writes, "If you want to show events through more than two or three characters, you probably want to go third person rather than first. It starts to feel unwieldy and confusing to have too many first person narrators thrown into the mix."

William Faulkner would not have agreed with Bransford's analysis though, as his novel, *As I Lay Dying*, is presented through fifteen different first person narrators with no pattern of narration. Every single chapter is a change in point of view for Faulkner, and his novel is controversial for that reason. Some readers would make it to a certain point and abandon the novel for any number of reasons. Therefore, an analysis of Faulkner's successful approaches (or lack thereof) can uncover valuable insights on how to write multiple points of view without losing a reader. From Faulkner's many changes in perspective in *As I Lay Dying*, a writer can learn that a novel must be engaging, clear, and purposeful for the best chance at retaining a reader.

Something Faulkner has mastered for this novel is unique character voices. When an author chooses to write in first person, the speaker must have a distinct voice. Even writing only one character, the author must ensure his mannerisms, thoughts, and style develop a more vivid

image of that person. In an article about using multiple points of view in a story, author Charles Soule advises, “Every POV character needs to be a person, fully and truly actualized within the story. . . .No two people on Earth see the world the same way; neither should your characters.” Even fiction should have well-formed and relatable characters in order to create a believable and compelling narrative. While any point of view character should be dynamic and vibrant, in a novel with multiple perspective characters distinction is even more vital. Not only does the reader need the essential relatable connection, but he needs that feeling with more than one character individually. Each character should have a unique voice that the reader can easily distinguish.

Each of Faulkner’s main characters have well-developed, unique voices, while the POV characters with very few chapters do not. One could make an argument that some of the characters with only one chapter are necessary due to a specific detail that they can include or withhold, but many of them do not have enough page time to be extremely developed. Soule writes, “It’s challenging enough to get one character’s perspective right—doing it with 10 puts it on a whole new level.” Faulkner is attempting to conquer fifteen different perspective characters, and cutting some of those characters out could have brought an ease of clarity to the novel. Percy Lubbock advises, “Haphazard and unnecessary plunges into the inner life of the characters only confuse the effect, changing the focus without compensating gain” (para. 25). Peabody, Moseley, and MacGowan each only have one narrative chapter. Certainly a close reader could find lines in each perspective that would not have been revealed from the perspective of the Bundren family. First person perspective is limited in highlighting the opinions of those outside the current POV, and Faulkner makes up for that limitation by diving into the first person perspective of outside observers. Perhaps he could have used an omniscient third person narrator to simplify the entire

novel. The great number of first person perspectives are not as clear as they could have been if Faulkner had chosen a different type of perspective. However, any technique that is not totally clear could be argued for if it is for a purpose. Faulkner's crafts tie in easily with the themes of the novel. Notice that the disorienting chapters allow the reader to directly feel the chaotic events of the book. By the end, the reader has been tossed around just as much as the coffin. Another area that Faulkner's purpose is clear is in the main character's voices.

Despite the many jostling changes in perspective, the characters who are meant to be emotionally relevant to the themes and plot of the story are extremely distinct from one another. Darl feels like the main character throughout because he provides introspection and deep thoughts in his chapters. Vardamon's age is apparent in the simple and repetitive thoughts. Jewel's one chapter is marked by anger and bitterness. Cash is the only character whose voice is fragmented, listed, or extremely short. These individual markers are imperative in a novel with this many characters. In the first chapter, Darl begins the narration, which is another reason he seems like the main character despite the multiple points of view portrayed. Faulkner writes, "Between the shadow spaces they are yellow as gold, like soft gold, bearing on their flanks in smooth undulations the marks of the adze blade: a good carpenter, Cash is" (3). The delicately crafted and beautifully worded descriptions of the scenes are unique to Darl's thoughtful personality. Compare that to Jewel's opinion when he looks at Cash's carpentry: "I told him to go somewhere else. I said Good God do you want to see her in it" (11). The bitter and sullen attitude Jewel always carries is palpable throughout the one chapter in which he speaks directly. Jewel seems to be the one adult character who is emotionally affected by his mother's death, and that shows through his negative attitude. The siblings' thoughts on their mother's coffin reveal a lot about each one. In her first chapter, the one girl of the family, Dewey Dell, thinks, "And Cash

like sawing the long hot sad yellow days up into planks and nailing them to something” (18). Even in context, this complete sentence about her brother is not quite clear or complete. Dewey Dell is scattered and distracted as she is more worried about an unplanned pregnancy than she is about her mother’s death. Youngest brother, Vardamon, does not speak directly to the reader until after his mother’s death, making his voice perhaps the most distinct. He is constantly rambling in short incoherent sentences. Processing his mother’s death, he thinks, “I can feel where the fish was in the dust. It is cut up into pieces of not-fish now, not-blood on my hands and overalls. Then it wasn’t so. It hadn’t happened then. And now she is getting so far ahead I cannot catch her.” Rambling and disjointed, the youngest member of the family is always trapped in his own inner world, contemplating the swirling turmoil inside a developing mind. Finally, first-born Cash is always presented through a totally different technique, his first chapter is a numbered list, one chapter ends on an unfinished sentence. It won’t balance If they want it to tote and ride on a balance, they will have—” (62). The chapter ends with the sentence his family had cut off at the beginning to represent how Cash’s wisdom is never acknowledged. Faulkner carefully created a very distinct writing style for each of the siblings, which makes it clear that was his purpose. The distinctions between the voices of each sibling makes getting to know them all and adapting to the transition between the characters easier. The characters that are important have dialect, stylistic differences, and unique voices, which enhances Faulkner’s narrative. While Faulkner effectively gives his characters distinct voices, the story is still muddled by unclear details and confusing transitions.

Faulkner requires a lot from his reader, which is not always a negative quality. A reader typically enjoys being rewarded with details when he is reading carefully, so leaving some room for inference leaves the reader feeling intelligent and clever. An author can take the full burden

of the narrative by giving the reader a smooth and natural flow of events, or he can require some effort from the reader. Switching perspectives or timing throughout a story is fine, as long as the reader has more reasons to stick with a story until the end. In *As I Lay Dying*, if a reader is going in blind, he soon becomes slightly more disoriented with each new perspective character. When are they going to end, and how will he remember them all? However, Faulkner's choice to use many first person POVs contribute to the development of each character, giving it a purpose, and the fresh style of each chapter keeps the reader from getting bored, so it is engaging. On the other hand, a different perspective or fewer POV characters could have helped the novel be easier to follow along with. A reader who picks up *As I Lay Dying* must keep track of many characters; therefore, Faulkner's other intricacies and twists add unnecessary chaos and confusion.

To simplify the narrative, Faulkner could have worked in orienting details at the beginning of each chapter. The stream of consciousness first person narrators often begin in the middle of a thought or pick up a thought from their previous perspective chapter. Consider the beginning of a chapter narrated by a generous farmer the family meets on their trip, Armstid. His only narrative chapter starts, "But time I give him another sup of whisky and supper was about ready, he had done already bought a team from somebody, on a credit" (124). This chapter begins with a conjunction that connects it to nothing. It is unclear if this dialectic sentence means "about the time," or "but by the time," leaving some ambiguity and consideration for the reader. The reader can easily take a moment to reorient himself and understand what is going on, but needing to pause and look back or look around pulls the reader from the events of the story and forces his attention to the stylistic choices. Bransford writes a relevant comment: "A novel's perspective needs to be consistent so a reader knows where to situate themselves within a scene." The tactic of consistency can be used purposefully depending on what the author is trying to bring attention

to. Faulkner uses these in medias res chapter beginnings to make the reader think about the character who is narrating. Toward the end of the book, a story told by Vardamon is split into several chapters. The events of the story continue in between Vardamon's chapters, but each time the reader comes back, he must remember the story from the previous chapter. One of these chapters starts off, "When I went to find where they stay at night, I saw something. They said, 'Where is Darl? Where did Darl go?' They Carried her back under the apple tree" (151). For several chapters, Vardamon has been talking about something he saw one night, creatures he is looking after to know where they sleep, and his mother's coffin. All three of the events are connected, but the reader must puzzle them together through the disjointed chapters. The short pause that a conjunction or a callback to another chapter creates at the beginning of a chapter makes the reader orient himself before he moves forward. A smooth transition or introduction could also orient the reader, but Faulkner allows the reader to carry some of the narrative burden by making these connections rather than reading them. Bransford goes as far as to claim, "It's completely disorienting to head jump from one character to another. . .It's exhausting, confusing mental labor. Don't make the reader do it." In this opinion, Faulkner's entire book must be terrible, until one considers that Faulkner seems to have a goal other than keeping his reader energized. Bransford's quotation emphasizes the importance of ease and simplicity in modern literature. Each decision that requires some effort from the reader contributes to an overall feeling of confusion or strain at the end of the book, which will determine how a reader reacts to the novel.

Another questionable choice that really has the potential to deeply confuse the reader in *As I Lay Dying* is the way Faulkner uses italics. At the beginning of the novel, the dialog between Anse and his sons emphasizes the dilemma of sending Darl and Jewel away with the

wagon, only for a chapter under his name to be the chapter in which his mother dies. Faulkner uses italics to denote Darl's thoughts from afar while the reader is present in the room with the rest of the family. Even though he is not present, when Dewey Dell goes outside, the italics report, "Feeling her eyes and turning, he will say: I would not let it grieve me, now" (35). Here, he pictures his sister talking with the doctor outside. His absence and comments do not fit together. Regardless of the purpose behind the choice, it pulls the reader out of the scene, making him question the style of the narrative. Darl's name at the beginning of the chapter followed by a setting he is known to be absent from immediately breaks the reader from getting lost in the novel. The novel's fragile realism built through vivid characters is immediately shattered by this incongruent description. These unique choices force the reader to think carefully and reorient himself within the setting. Despite the difficulty in creating a smooth read, the use of italics here does have a purpose.

Represented by the first person pronoun in the title, and the driving narrative force, Addie Bundren is the central character of this novel. Faulkner makes such a unique choice for the perspective in this specific chapter because the moment this matriarch dies is a turning point. This chapter starts a journey so long that just the one-way trip will take until the end of the novel. As shown in his detailed descriptions Darl is emotional and sensitive, so his perspective works best for what should be an emotional scene. His absence, however, represents the distance that exists between each member of the family. This scene is the first major crack, but Faulkner will continue to use italics to convolute the perspectives and timeline as the story progresses. At times, it is not as easy to see why Faulkner uses italics in other chapters. One example occurs in a chapter narrated by the Bundrens' neighbor, Vernon Tull, when the italics seem to depict a possibly imaginary conversation. The line before and several lines after this are the only lines in

italics. Tull's italics state, "I don't mind the folks falling. It's the cotton and corn I mind. Neither does Peabody mind the folks falling. How bout it, Doc?" (58). The doctor replies also in italics but not in quotation marks, and the conversation goes back and forth between Tull and Peabody for half a page all in italics rather than dialogue. Perhaps these two characters are having a whispered conversation, but the exact reason is not clear from the text. These examples of italics used randomly in a chapter are not the only ones in the book, Faulkner uses this technique a number of times throughout. Experimental techniques can cleverly reveal information, but in the middle of the chapter, they are more distracting than illuminating. Faulkner's unusual choice in italics does not bring the reader deeper into the story, and the purpose of the technique is not clear enough to justify the use.

When the purpose is clear, an unusual shift in perspective can enhance an author's desired effect in his story. Faulkner, however, uses so many craft elements at once in *As I Lay Dying* that the story becomes difficult to follow and understand. One clever reviewer humorously represents the way many readers likely feel when she titled her video review: "What the Faulkner Did I Just Read?" That sentiment may be held by many readers as they try to juggle stream of consciousness, dialect, unreliable narrators, vague details, random time jumps, and unclear emphasis in this already busy multi-perspective novel. Every reader can choose from millions of options when committing to a book, so grabbing and keeping an audience is an important aspect of writing. However, the author can also sacrifice some of the reader's comfort in order to emphasize a theme within the novel. Books like the *Harry Potter* series completely accommodate the reader's suspension of disbelief. A reader can get lost for a few chapters without ever having his attention called to the words on the page. Rowling writes with a very natural cadence and a fast-paced narrative that keeps the reader occupied from beginning to end.

However, every detail is easy to pick up and themes are extremely simple. Rowling's purpose is not to challenge literary standards, but only to tell an engaging story. On the other hand, authors like Faulkner are remembered for challenging the standards and delivering a story in a unique and memorable style. Every author must decide what his purpose is before beginning the story. The purpose will determine every following decision, starting with the point of view. A balance is crucial. If he wants his book to be more than decor, an author does not want the readers to perceive the novel as too convoluted without enough of a reward to continue reading. A writer must balance his own goals and intentions with what an audience is willing to consume.

Application and Conclusion

Even if a writer chooses a basic first, second, or third person perspective, each has assets and drawbacks. The direct and vivid thoughts and feelings from a first person narrator can be unreliable or unaware of certain aspects of the story. In contrast, the third person narrator can see anything in the setting, but making characters vivid from an outside perspective requires some careful attention. The rare but powerful second person perspective resists realism in the narrative because it is less common and natural; however, being uncommon is precisely what gives it the power to stand out and emphasize different emotions in the reader. Stream of consciousness, epistolary novels, and the intrusive or unintrusive narrator are only a few of the ways a talented writer can stretch perspective for the best effect for each story. A topic that seems simple on the surface quickly becomes more nuanced with each successful experiment.

From Homer's vague omniscient narrator to the direct thoughts of Faulkner's stream of consciousness, multiple perspectives in novels have changed throughout time. Each historical era is a reaction to the one before, forever churning the ideas of each generation. Literary

conventions have loose borders, and the development is less than linear, but certain authors definitely influenced perspective as we see it today. Unique writing styles like the epistolary novel or romantic introspection allowed future writers to build off the concepts of those before them. The modern writer can pull from hundreds of years of literary canon to continue to build his craft.

If an author reads a book and does not leave with any writing tips, he is not reading correctly. So, at the end of *As I Lay Dying*, what can the careful reader conclude about writing from multiple points of view? Considering the length of a novel and the vast selection a modern reader can choose from, the twenty-first century author must carefully curate his story for the audience. If that author decides that a literary shift in perspective is essential for his novel, Faulkner's experimental novel provides many lessons for that writer to consider. If he is trying to achieve literary excellence and also keep a new reader engaged, there are a few tips to glean.

First, each character must have a unique voice. A well-rounded character will be more relatable and interesting. When writing many POVs, it is especially vital to help orient the reader with a distinct voice for each character. Next, it is important to keep the narrative engaging. By the end of Faulkner's novel, the reader is overwhelmed and slightly confused, which Faulkner compensates for through the depth and meaning of the complex tale. For a writer who is not confident with a very meaningful and detailed story, keeping craft elements simple will form a more coherent story. On the other hand, with enough time and effort, complicated craft can achieve a beautiful novel like *As I Lay Dying*. The goal is to achieve a balance of complexity and clarity. Finally, the purpose of every element used should be apparent. Using multiple points of view just to cram them all in will quickly deter the audience. If that audience can see that the author carefully planned each detail, he is more likely to continue reading. Regardless of any

confusion earned at the end of *As I Lay Dying*, the novel has stood the test of time, proving its success. Faulkner's vivid characters, complex relationships, and relatable emotions overcome all the busy craft elements.

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The Matchmaker of Mystview

Prologue

The inhabitants of Mystview Village were reared hearing that it rested between an inescapable forest and an unscalable mountain. Isolated, Mystview's ecosystem grew to be domestically independent. Foreign trade and travel would never be considered in the near paradise, even if they could easily leave.

In the center, the town square had originally contained throngs of the passionate population in praise ceremonies, community gatherings, and town teachings. Long ago, everyone believed in a divine and benevolent force responsible for the town's convenience. Those who turn to him call him the Provider, the Creator, the Healer, or the Matchmaker, for he takes care of every need.

Unfortunately, many years of prosperity caused Mystviewers to grow ironically prideful; modern Mystview Square only presented concerts, markets, and government meetings. Prosperity blinded the town from the truth of Provider's kindness; it was all that separated them from the typical treachery of life. Generations repeatedly took the blessed providence for granted, becoming increasingly bashful or neglectful with their belief. Even so, health, wealth, and happiness were still abundant for Mystviewers. Only the stress of self-sufficiency plagued the citizens. Many still chose independence, unaware of the peace in total reliance.

However, great blessings undoubtedly awaited anyone who resisted the way of the world in favor of the truth. Whispers of a Matchmaker with a perfect plan floated around the school yards. Rumors of complex, magical, and mysterious circumstances leading someone to his Match pass between kids like campfire stories. Even though most dismiss the idea of Matchmaker or even a Provider as being too good to be true, those who trust and wait will experience a bit of perfection.

The last block of the residential center was close to the woods. On a street where fresh construction was common, a loud blue house reflected the boisterous Monroe family who had moved in the previous summer. Broken blinds on the top left window revealed walls plastered with scraps of paper with doodles, ripped out sketchbook pages, and paintings on reused canvases. Colorful sheets and blankets were scattered around the bed, and at the desk, the artist scratched in her half-full sketchbook, her pencil scratching furiously. She paused a few times to hold the paper up and squint at it before adding or erasing. Finally, the image appeared as she'd like it to, or close enough.

Closer to town, the Basque family home was painted with subdued colors and kept meticulously. Inside, only one room was ever dirty; stacks of books cluttered the floor and shelves. The bookworm sat on the edge of his bed and stared down at his feet. Dangling slightly above the floor, one sock was blue and one was red with orange stripes. Contemplating the pair, he was no longer doing his homework. It was difficult to focus while his parents talked in the next room. Through the walls, he heard his parents agree that they should have trusted the Matchmaker.

Vera shoved the sharp point of a tack through both the paper and the wall. She stepped back to admire the newest addition to the flurry of projects. The prince in the drawing gazed at

the princess in a way the artist had never seen her own father look at her mother. The duvet puffed up like a cloud around her as she flopped onto the bed. Releasing a deep sigh, she whispered a plea for a better marriage than her mom and dad had.

Thumping his heels against the bed, Lionel contemplated his future. What would happen to his family now? A nagging thought whispered a reminder of tomorrow's test, but his mind swam with fear of changes ahead. Lionel asked the Matchmaker for peace if he could avoid his parents' mistakes. He suddenly felt calm. Laying down, thoughts of romance carried him into a dream.

Chapter 1: A Work in Progress

Clumsily juggling armfuls of last minute supplies, Vera barely gripped the knob to open the front door. Thankfully, she was able to bump it closed with her knee, but she cringed thinking of the bang waking up her family. *They wouldn't care if they woke you up*, she thought as she spun to hustle toward her studio.

If her hands hadn't been so full, she would have tugged her jacket closed. The cool morning air made her shiver, but at least the chill breeze was proof that Vera had started her commute before the sun did. Since the beginning of fall, the sun had begun to sleep in; now it would only start to warm Mystview Village in the early afternoon.

Vera's disorganized jumble of renovation materials and art supplies towered high enough to block her sight, but she knew where to turn from her periphery. First left at the pale green mailbox, then right at the house with a blue splattered roof, and right again at the glasses store.

Vera willed her legs to move faster, rushing to beat her friend to the studio. With a jolt, the bulky toe of her boot caught a protruding cobblestone. Vera quickly realized her own limitations, stumbled several steps, and narrowly avoided having to pick her supplies up from the sidewalk.

The neon sign above the coffee shop on the corner of her block signaled Vera that it was time to snap out of her thoughts. She noted the two store fronts before her own studio door; the coffee shop with the neon sign on the end and what looked like a clothing store. All Vera could see were the vintage clothes on display in the window.

Just then, the third door swung open. Standing with her arms crossed, Clara smirked in disapproval as she held the door for Vera's clumsy entrance. "Did you sleep in? Or do you just have short legs?"

“I’ve been taller than you’ll ever be since we were eleven.” Vera turned sideways to squeeze through the doorway with everything in her arms.

“This place looks better in the daylight.” Clara allowed the door to squeal shut behind her as she stepped into the room. When the latch clicked closed, patches of green paint flaked off the door to reveal a garish scarlet beneath

Inside, both women looked out of the large front display window. The sun shone through the glass, highlighting unidentifiable streaks and smudges covering the large glass storefront.

“If you say so.” With a sigh, Vera turned to scan the room in the light. She released her bags and supplies, shaking her sore arms and wiggling her cramped fingers. “My back is still sore.”

“Why? I did all the work.” Clara flexed her thin arms and gritted her teeth.

Vera pointed at each item of furniture as she counted. “I brought eight out of twelve pieces of furniture in.”

Clara flipped her long, dark hair over her shoulder dramatically. “At least I got to work on time this morning.”

“Well, there won’t be work if we don’t get started!” Vera couldn’t stop the smile creeping across her face.

The room was silent for a moment. “You’re not going to blame me if this doesn’t work out, right?” Clara’s eyebrows folded together.

“Please.” Vera rolled her eyes. “Anything will be better than staying home with Joshua, mom, and dad bothering me all the time.” She shook her head, tucking some escaped strands of copper hair behind her ear. She nodded definitively. “This place was cheap, and it’s within walking distance. I’m glad you found that deal.”

“It’ll be great if you put enough work in.” Clara kicked at a bag in the center of the room, and three bottles of paint rolled out of its mouth. Vera stuck out a foot to stop them before they could get too far.

“I’ll be fine if you don’t ruin everything first!” She took off her jean jacket and threw it at Clara’s head, but her friend managed to catch it before impact.

“I’ll keep my end of the deal as soon as I graduate.” Clara grabbed the broom.

“Don’t worry about it. I feel calm about this.” Vera sliced open a box and started to unpack cleaning supplies. Clara nodded, and the two set to work.

They barely had to exchange a word as they unpacked, cleaned, and set up the room. The room felt brighter with each swipe of a paper towel across the window, and Vera’s spirits lifted as the floor became clearer and cleaner.

A little over an hour later, Vera was trying to clear clutter from every surface in the room when Clara suddenly turned to her. “I forgot, this paper was stuck in the door when I got here.” She thrust out a pale yellow paper.

Puzzled, Vera took it. No one even knew she was renting this space other than Clara and the landlord, and they had already settled any paperwork she may have. The sturdy yellowish paper was folded in thirds like a horizontal brochure. In the center on the back, what she read in flawless cursive made Vera cringe. Horrifically, the elegant handwriting spelled *Vera Vidalia Monroe*.

Chapter 2: Searching for Inspiration

Vera was lost staring at the page for a moment before looking up at Clara. “What is that face for?” Vera asked, seeing Clara’s crossed arms and furrowed brows.

“You only *just* told me. How does he know after like a month?”

“I’m not talking to James anymore. You and my family are the only ones who should know my middle name.”

Suddenly, Clara’s eyes were as round as the full moon, “What if it’s from—”

“Don’t even get my hopes up,” Vera mumbled. Then she sighed, “The Matchmaker wouldn’t send a letter like this, I’m not even sure—”

“You don’t know! No one can tell exactly what events led them to their Match. Who’s to say it couldn’t be magical and mysterious?” Clara wiggled her fingers excitedly and raised one eyebrow.

“You know what? Six months ago I would have said magic doesn’t exist,” Vera nearly whispered.

“Yeah, what do you think now?” Clara waited quietly.

“Maybe someone is working on my behalf,” she said after a moment of thought, carefully studying to see if Clara would give her a dubious look.

“So you *do* believe in the Matchmaker!” Clara squealed, punching a winning fist in the air.

“Okay, maybe,” was all Vera could admit without being swept away in hopeful delusions.

“Come on, then. Open it!” At her friend’s impatient shove, Vera folded one flap up and the other down to reveal the inside. They were expecting a letter, but the page had the corporate plainness of an advertisement.

Find your inspiration in nature. Come to Tranquil Trails Nature Reserve.

More information graced the rest of the page, but Vera folded it closed without reading it.

“It’s just a dumb ad.” She tossed it on a table. “What’s next?” She looked around the room, taking a deep breath.

“We used to daydream about your Match all the time,” Clara murmured.

“Well, that was before I dated four guys that just wasted my time.” Vera turned back to the cluttered countertop she had been working on. “What was the Matchmaker doing then?”

“Were you really trusting the Matchmaker then?” She said to Vera’s back.

“I felt like if I didn’t try hard enough I would end up alone.”

“Exactly,” Clara said, almost under her breath. They’d had the conversation before. Vera knew that if they kept talking about it, she would only become irrationally jealous of Clara’s effortless doubtlessness.

“Who cares about guys anyway?” Vera turned to survey the room.

Clara’s laugh sounded forced. “Right! Let’s get to work!”

With steady progress, the windows, walls, and floors were as clean as they would get. The clutter was cleared and organized, everything was unpacked. Vera had been trying to avoid moving the furniture, but she couldn’t put it off any longer.

“Would I focus better with the natural light of the window, or with the cozy quaintness of this nook?” Vera wondered aloud, spinning slowly in the center of the room with her arms held out in front of her, her fingers creating a frame around each space.

“Are you asking me? How should I know about your focus?” Clara’s voice was muffled as she bent to look in a cabinet.

“Well, what do you think would make you want to work more?” She stood still, dropping her hands to her sides. Clara had pulled sandpaper out and started meandering toward the door.

“Does the brilliant window inspire you, or does the dank corner?” She asked as she began smoothing the door for a fresh coat of paint.

“Well, when you put it that way. . .” Vera pushed her desk against the window and began to turn again, looking for the next object to put into place. “It’s going to be perfect.”

“Which of us are you trying to convince?” Clara didn’t look away from the door. Vera considered the question, she wasn’t entirely sure. At the silence, Clara did turn around. “Oh, come on, at least it’s better than my dorm.”

“That’s not a high standard, but you’re right. It’s away from my parents. This is the birthplace of my career.” Grunting, she tried to push a cabinet that almost fell over.

“Absolutely, you’ll be selling paintings in no time.” Clara’s face lit up with excitement while she was babbling about the future.

“You’re optimistic.” Vera grabbed a rag and went to the sink. Clara was nearly finished sanding the inside of the door, so Vera tossed her the damp rag.

“Haven’t you seen Lynn and Jeremy? No one would have imagined them together, but you should see them now. You can tell they love each other just by the looks on their faces.”

Clara caught the rag, setting the sandpaper aside.

“How do you know you even have a Match?” Vera knew her friend was right, but was not yet ready to concede. Next, she grabbed a can of light yellow paint for the door and a thick brush.

“I think anyone who wants a Match gets one. Some people don’t want to be with others, but the Matchmaker knows that.” Clara took the brush as Vera pried open the can.

“You say that because that’s what we’ve heard all our lives.” Vera took a moment to make sure she could find the right words for the next thought as she stirred the paint. “What’s wrong with me that none of the guys I’ve dated have been my Match?”

Clara snorted, “Oh, come on, I haven’t dated anyone at all, does that make me even worse?”

“Of course not!” But Vera could explain the reason, she only knew it wasn’t Clara’s fault she hadn’t dated anyone. She was less sure about her own mistakes. “Why didn’t you date anyone?”

“I’m just smarter than you.” Clara did not dare make eye contact.

“Okay, shut up and paint.” Vera threw a flimsy paint stirrer in retaliation.

“Help me, then!”

“I don’t have any more paintbrushes. I’ll reload your brush,” Vera offered, pushing a step stool over to the door. Then, she grabbed a pen and started a shopping list on a scrap of paper in a pile on the counter.

“Remember Gary? If it weren’t for him, you’d still spend an entire first date talking about yourself.” She swiped the first stripe of yellow paint at the top of the door. Vera groaned, remembering the nightmare date who had given her a complete autobiography over coffee.

“You’re right.” She thought back to that date. I did like that little coffee shop we went to, though.” Yawning, Vera wrote coffee on her shopping list.

“He didn’t ruin it for you?” Clara laughed and handed Vera the paint brush.

“No, he couldn’t have. It was so magical—”

“You don’t believe in magic.”

“Hush. It was called The Cantina, how cute is that?” Vera swiped dripping paint from the brush and handed it back. “I want to go there again,” She mused, picking up her pen again. “Do you remember what street it was on?”

“Are you kidding? That was years ago.” Clara was frantically trying to spread cascading drops of paint across the door. Despite her best efforts, two drops splattered onto the floor. Vera grabbed a rag to wipe it up.

“Remind me to look it up later.” Vera dodged more drops. She grabbed a towel to spread on the floor. “You haven’t heard of it around campus?”

“I don’t think so.” Clara shrugged. Vera wrote *The Cantina* a little further down on the page to look up later.

Slowly, the space started to feel like less of a warehouse and more like a studio. Vera tried to convince herself she would actually focus and find inspiration. Her desk and easel posed toward the window meant that any pedestrians would see her as if she were on display with the mannequins next door.

Inspiration was the word that Vera continually chanted as they worked on the room. Her goal was to sit down to the easel and let artwork flow from her like a poet with all of the muses at his disposal. With every decision, she wanted to work closer and closer to the perfect space. As perfect as a space with an imperfect artist could be.

“Do you think I’m talented?” Vera broke the silence suddenly. Clara dropped the corner of the tapestry she’d been trying to hang.

“You made me drop that,” she groaned, reaching a pathetic hand down from the top of the stepstool.

“No, you’re just clumsy.” Vera rolled her eyes and picked the end up and handed it back.

“What are you hanging that with?”

“In the drawer over there.” Clara pointed to the desk. “Do you think I would be sweating on this ladder if I didn’t think you were going to change the art scene completely?”

“I don’t think I would go that far.” Vera couldn’t help but smile, crossing the room and tugging the drawer open. “I’m being serious.”

“Me too. I love your artwork.” Clara hung one foot off the ladder, waiting for the thumbtack. “Well, I love when you *actually* paint.”

In a few steps, Vera was at the base of the ladder. “You’re right. I think I’ll focus better here. I need to slow down, but I’m so impatient.” She reached up with the tack in an open palm and Clara took it, reaching for the corner of the tapestry again. “I get bored.”

“That’s why you need a partner. We would work so well toge—”

“Ding Dong!” A shrill voice rang out from the doorway. Clara grasped at the wall, nearly startled off the ladder.

Her heart felt like it would pound out of her chest. Looking at the doorway, Vera wished she had locked it.

Chapter 3: Shadows of the Past

“I thought you said you didn’t tell them about it yet?” Clara leaned down to Vera and whispered with an awkward smile. “Hey, Mrs. Monroe.” She waved before turning away, busying herself with unpacking a box of Vera’s art supplies onto a shelf.

“Hey, Ma, how did you know where to find me?” Vera allowed herself to be pulled down into a hug.

“You need to get to work here!” Her mother looked around the room, and Vera knew that she was only looking at the flaws. She glanced to Clara for some validation, but her friend was already buried in packaging paper.

“How did you get the address?” Vera repeated, placing a hand on her mother’s arm to keep her from unraveling into each dirty corner to nitpick and critique.

“Seriously, honey, the paint is peeling, there are chunks out of the concrete. Surely our office would have been more comfortable.” She always assumed she knew what was best. Her domination was the precise reason Vera had dated four guys in the last year longing for something her mom didn’t have total control over.

Remembering suddenly, Vera frantically looked around the room. Spotting what she needed, she looked back at her mom, who was bent over looking behind the desk. Relieved, Vera grabbed the page with her name on it. She barely had time to hide it behind her back before her mom turned back around.

“I’m serious. Let me get your dad in here to fix some of this. That window has a crack at the bottom!” Her mother exclaimed.

“No, it’s fine. And it’s mine. I want to set it up how I want it.”

“Yes! You’re right, your space. But *I* think it would be better with just a few—”

“What do you think of the door? We just finished painting it,” Clara cut in from the corner.

“Well the color—”

“Vera picked the color, and we both really like it. Don’t you?” Clara’d had a knack for changing the subject since they were young.

“Oh. Yeah, the color is very . . . lemony.” Vera’s mom looked like she’d eaten a lemon as she said the word. She looked around the room again. “Are you planning on painting the walls?”

“Maybe eventually,” Clara answered. While her mother was in conversation about the renovations, Vera shoved the letter into her back pocket.

“Well, like you said, we have a lot of work to do.” Vera interrupted before her mother could finish asking Clara why she hadn’t graduated college yet. The visit had only confirmed why Vera had not wanted to stay at home. “Wait.” She had just remembered, “How did you know where I was?”

There was no conversation left to distract from the question, and for one anomalous moment, Vera’s mom looked sheepish. She quickly recovered, saying, “Oh don’t you worry about it, your mother can always find you.” She practically scampered out the door, but at least she was careful not to touch the paint.

Vera and Clara looked at each other with equally wide eyes and furrowed brows. Glancing out the window, Vera had hoped to watch her mother cross the street at the end of the block. Instead of her back turning the corner, Vera spotted her mom looking over each shoulder before going into the coffee shop on the corner.

“That was sketchy,” Clara said before Vera even turned to ask if she’d seen.

“She must know someone in there.” Vera shrugged. “I’m not committing any more mental energy to her actions.”

“Right. Now get up, time is money!” Clara giggled.

“As if you had anything better to do.” Vera looked around again to see what else needed done, but all she could think about was her mom. She snapped open a folding chair and collapsed into it. “I’m stressed now.”

“Maybe you could relax at . . .” Clara looked around the room. “Hey, where did that letter go?” Vera grinned as she stood up to retrieve the crinkled papers from her back pocket, Clara’s mouth dropped open. “Why did you hide that?” she asked with a smug smile and teasing eyes.

“Hush, it’s nothing.” Vera tried to cram it back into her pocket.

“Wait! There’s something new on it!” Clara almost screamed. She looked around and whispered, “It’s new directions from the Matchmaker!”

“It’s my shopping list,” Vera said, holding up the folded and crumpled page. Clara’s face fell immediately.

“But. . .” she said slowly, looking like she had won the lottery. “You didn’t want your mom to see it because you know it could be important!” Clara squealed triumphantly.

“I just didn’t want to talk to her about it.” Vera started to open drawers on her desk that she had already organized.

“Exactly, because you know it’s special!” Clara’s excitement was almost palpable.

“It doesn’t matter,” Vera snapped. She had begun to feel a familiar excitement which had always ended in heartache.

“When are you going to start work?” Clara graciously dropped the topic. She picked up a box and looked around for the scissors.

“I’m having an open house launch on Monday, so everything needs to be ready by then.”

She rubbed her forehead.

“Great, then you have plenty of time, go relax or get some painting done.” Clara held out both hands. Vera took them and got to her feet. “Do you want me to go with you somewhere?”

Clara asked.

“No, I think I’ll go somewhere alone.” Vera reached into her pocket, her hand on the mysterious page. “Do you think you can find inspiration in nature?”

“I think you can find inspiration in the most boring places. A rock. Talking to a parent. Studying a textbook. Things like that.” A smile crept across Clara’s face.

Chapter 4: Journey Beyond the Studio

In the silence after Clara left, Vera's mind felt like a howling tornado of questions. Who knew her full name? Why did they send an advertisement to her? Who did her mom know on this block? Was any of it related?

Vera's stomach growled, reminding her that it was after noon. With the excuse to leave, she jumped up to grab her bag. The door's weight closed it behind her, and she tried to walk away from the confusion. Outside, the sun had chased away the chill from the morning. Feeling the warmth on her cheeks, Vera was glad she had left her jacket back at the studio.

The studio! Fear flashed into her mind, and she quickly pivoted, digging through her bag. Walking slowly, her mind was focused on her hand rather than on the road. At the very bottom of the clutter, she finally heard the jingle of her keychain.

As she pulled out her lanyard, the paper with her name on it and some pieces of trash tumbled from the bag with it. Vera swung her bag around to her back as she bent down to pick up the persistent page and her litter. Staring down at it, she paused to take a closer look. It was crumpled from being shoved into her pocket and bag, and she tried to smooth it along her leg to read it.

Find your inspiration in nature. Come to Tranquil Trails Nature Reserve.

We have what you can't find anywhere else. Nothing compares to creation. Give it a go today at

1018 Painter Street, right here in Mystview!

Though the page on the inside appeared to be an average typed and printed promotional flier, it was as if it had been written by someone listening in to her morning conversations. Not to mention that her name had been hand-written on the front, and even more, Vera recognized the street name.

As a teenager, Vera had often visited an art museum to escape her hectic household. She never had a car, and she felt that arriving at the museum drenched in sweat from walking there would immediately dampen her experience. Thus, her only escape was via the single public bus of Mystview. Frank, the most passionate bus driver, always drove her back home for free when she was ready.

While waiting for the bus in the summer, the green metal benches burned, and in the winter they stung like ice. It was a time that she was starting to get serious about learning how to paint, and she had been committed to reading an art textbook through every wait and ride. However, she would usually find herself staring at nothing, lost deep in her thoughts.

Sometimes she would be lost in the pictures of the book, but other times she pondered the landscape. More than once, she remembered spotting the adjacent street sign and contemplating a perfect world where the art museum had been built on Painter Street. That's why the name of the street had jumped out at her from the advertisement.

A distant roar caught Vera's attention, and she was suddenly aware of her surroundings. Over the hill, the bus rumbled toward her. Vera lifted the strap of her bag from one shoulder over her head, folded the page, and carefully tucked it into her bag. She jogged to the nearby bus stop just as the bus squealed to a stop.

Entry-level jobs, frustrating relationships, and her final few high school classes had taken up too much of Vera's time in the last two years, but the bus doors still had a familiar sound. As she stepped onto the grimy stairs, she felt like no time had passed at all. Only the wrinkles on Frank's face and the rips in the vinyl seats had grown as much as Vera had since her last trip on the bus.

“Hey, kiddo!” boomed the deep voice of the driver. “It’s been a long time, nice to see you!” His beaming greeting transported her back in time, and suddenly she only felt total peace and comfort. She slid into the same seat she always had, close to the exit and her unlikely friend. She looked back at the nearly empty bus; there were two others slumped in seats behind her, and Vera wondered if they had a destination at all.

Frank eagerly asked questions in an effort to catch up. Vera did not struggle to fill him in. The usual conversation about how much time had passed led into questions about her choices and changes. Vera told him about the studio, complained about her parents, and bragged about how helpful Clara had been.

“You going to the museum?” Frank interjected as he was passing the college. Before she knew it, Vera had taken up the entire ride talking about herself. A sudden stab of guilt reminded her of her date with Gary.

“Close, just a street down, it’s called Painter Street, but I can walk.” She didn’t want to take more advantage of him than she already had, but when she looked out the window as they passed the bus stop, she smiled, knowing that Frank was altering his route for her.

She bounded quickly down the stairs, waving a see you later to Frank. Turning to the entrance of the enigmatic reserve, Vera was ready to find out why she was there.

Chapter 5: Taking The Path Not Advertised

Vera found herself mesmerized by the intricate beauty of a wrought iron arch. *Tranquil Trails Nature Reserve* stood out in shiny gold letters amongst twisting black metal leaves and vines. Through the arch, a gray stone walkway led her gaze to a white paneled information building. Three windows stood guard above counters with no one sitting behind them, so Vera followed the stone trail straight past the small hut. Past the building, the path curved up a hill and broadened into a courtyard encircled by enchanting pine trees. The entrances of dirt paths disappeared between the trees, and wooden signs waited to direct visitors to various animal sanctuaries, agricultural areas, and hiking trails.

Vera counted eight stone tables which cut the stone circle into an octagon. For a moment, she just looked at the courtyard, wondering what exactly she was doing here.

“Hello?” The gravelly inquisition startled Vera, and she whipped around, looking back toward the entrance. An older man waved above his head, and his other hand rested on the handle of a broom. “What brings you to the reserve today?” The man began sweeping toward her, brown leaves crackling off the path on either side of him.

“I got an advertisement.” Vera reached for her bag, but with a sudden pang of panic, she realized it was no longer hanging from her shoulder.

“Advertisement? For what?” The sweeping man still approached, leaving a clear trail behind him.

“For here,” was all she could muster, her mind racing. It was safe on the bus, she reassured herself. Frank had probably already set it aside.

“We don’t make advertisements,” he said. She would probably just be able to get the bag when she got back on the bus. She wouldn’t need anything in it here in nature, Vera tried to reassure herself.

“Wait, you don’t?” Vera caught up to the conversation, but she couldn’t even show him the flier to prove what she was talking about.

“Naw, this place doesn’t need a commercial. We have what you can’t find anywhere else, and that needs no propaganda.” He winked. Vera blinked slowly, her mouth hanging slightly open. She was certain that was exactly what the ad had said. She tried to think of the next part.

“Nothing compares to creation,” both Vera and the sweeping man said in unison. She pinched her own wrist and blinked at the man, who looked completely calm.

“You got that right, darling.” He’d swept close enough that she could see his face clearly, he had a crooked nose and his open eye sparkled as he winked at her. “People come here on their own just when they need something important.” He passed her and continued to sweep in the opposite direction.

"Well, can you tell me what’s important?" The question popped into Vera’s mind suddenly and exploded from her mouth before she could stop it.

He turned to face her. "I don't need to tell you anything. It will tell you what you need to know." He turned and walked out of sight behind a tree.

“Wait, what does that mean?” Vera called and waited. At his silence, Vera dashed after him.

The man was nowhere to be seen. Behind her, there were no leaves on the walkway. Vera blinked and squeezed her eyes closed a few times before slowly turning around, the day was becoming more and more strange.

Right in front of her, a dirt path bordered in shades of green marked the entrance to the nature trail. Shaking her head and taking a deep breath, Vera began trying to find an answer to even one of her questions from the day as she ambled down the shady path. The trail of soft dirt curved through a forest of ferns and wildflowers. Vines swooped from limb to limb like snakes draped across the branches. Only speckles of sunlight made it through the branches, but every so often, Vera would feel the warmth of a spot hitting her shoulder or face. The air was cool and pleasant, and Vera found herself enjoying the walk despite her dubious expectations.

Soon, she found herself in a clearing. A large rock stoically observed the clearing from the far side. Struck with an idea, Vera strode over to the rock, climbed up, and took a seat. Looking out across the grassy meadow, she felt like a queen observing her vast land.

One chirp stood out louder amongst the chorus of birdsong, yet Vera searched in vain to find even a single bird in the branches. The sun shining through made the leaves glow like neon and created beams of light that looked tangible.

Vera stretched out with her back flat against the sun-warmed rock. She gazed into the pale sky, noticing white feathers in neat repeating stripes across the sky. Analyzing the shapes of each cloud, the shadows and the lines, she imagined what colors and strokes she might use on a canvas.

She sighed and rolled over. The creatures in the grass were much easier to find than the ones in the trees, even though birds were so much larger. Contemplating perspective, she watched an ant climb his hill empty-handed. She wondered if he was retreating from something or if he had accomplished a job she could not see.

She sat up, her back was starting to ache from the hard surface, so she decided it was time to move on and jumped off the rock. She reached her arms as high as she could, then touched her toes. She spotted a yellow leaf and picked it up before standing up straight. Before long, she had a fistfull of leaves. Some leaves were more appealing than others. One had wider veins on it than any of the others, another had a crescent shape eaten out of the center, each one she appreciated for its unique details.

Soon, she got distracted from the leaves and started to look at rocks. The stones in the dirt were individually painted. The variety amazed Vera, and before long she had a handful of rocks with patterns she had never seen before.

By the time she had returned to the mouth of the trail, the sun was getting low in the sky. Though Vera did not feel like she had answers, she felt surprisingly peaceful. Still, she wondered if the day had been a waste of time. What was the purpose? What had she accomplished?

Back in the courtyard, something new caught her eye. At one of the picnic tables, white papers strewn across the bench formed a frame around a young man who looked close to Vera's age. She resented that he broke her focus and dropped her handfuls of rocks on the ground. She was trying not to look at the studious guy, afraid that her sour expression would start an altercation.

But there was something about him she couldn't tear her eyes from. Not that he was chiseled by angels or crafted by an artist, but that he was entrenched in his studies with such dedication. It seemed like he was gazing into the pages of notes just like she would gaze at a blank canvas; both desperate to accomplish something yet helpless to make a move.

She was still looking over at him when he looked up and glanced around the courtyard. Vera panicked, forcing her long strides to take her down the hill before she had an awkward interaction with this guy. She raced back to the entrance, but just as she reached it, she was pulled back into one last glance up the hill. Her eyes caught his suddenly, and she felt his gaze like a warm beam of light across her face.

Chapter 6: Morning Meeting

Lionel's long strides carried him past the clock tower as it chimed eight times. His heart raced, not because of the time but because of his destination. Most of the other students seized the opportunity to sleep in on a Saturday, so on the silent campus, every footfall seemed to echo louder than the last.

Mystview Village College housed any inhabitants who desired higher education. Not everyone would choose that path, but the option was there for those who wanted further learning. Lionel had to maintain an excellent GPA to keep his scholarships. That goal had been easy for six semesters, but the seventh threatened to shatter his unbroken streak.

He finally stood before Mrs. Sanderson's office door, his hand hesitating. He steadied his breath before knocking. The first visit had been an unwelcome shove from Lionel's comfort zone, and the thump in his chest was only minimized marginally with the third session.

"Good morning, Lionel," chirped Mrs. Sanderson, swinging the door wide after the first knock. Her cheeks rounded, revealing large bleach-white teeth. Lionel could feel warm red creep across his cheeks, the familiar stab in his chest nagged unrelentingly. "How is your studying going?" She ushered him into the small but organized office. A second desk was on the opposite wall from the desk where Mrs. Sanderson usually sat in a rolling chair. Few knick-knacks graced the window sills and desks, but the shelves were full of books.

"Could be better." Though he hadn't told her that the only help he'd received in his entire educational experience was hers, the truth was hard to hide. The door gently clicked shut behind him and they both took a seat. Next to each desk was a chair to meet with one student at a time.

“Well that’s why we’ve been meeting, right?” She turned his glum attitude into something positive. Lionel looked at his feet as he dragged a loafer-clad toe across the ornate area rug.

“It’s just that this is unusual for me.” Lionel couldn’t bring himself to look up and meet her eye.

“I’ve noticed these were not like typical tutoring sessions.” Mrs. Sanderson suddenly sounded apprehensive. “I talked with your advisor.” She dragged out the sentence, and Lionel glanced up at her, feeling strangely overheated.

“Is something wrong?” Panic stabbed through his chest at the idea of a failed class, a delayed graduation, or worse, a reprimand.

“You have perfect attendance and a perfect GPA. . .” she was still hesitating.

“So why have I needed tutoring each week?” Lionel tried to fill in what she was tiptoeing around.

“Yes, and I haven’t noticed you taking careful notes like we talked about.” She wasn’t looking at him with disdain even though her observation sent his mind into a flurry of self-doubt. He looked at his feet, unsure of how he could answer. At his silence, Mrs. Sanderson continued, “You’ve aced nearly four years of majoring in math with a concentration in calculus, yet you struggle with History of Art. Can you explain why this class is different?”

“I don’t think I can express it tactfully.” His timid voice was almost cynical. He had one hand over the opposite elbow, leaning on the doorway for support.

“Is it something in the class I could be doing differently?” Mrs. Sanderson wheeled away from the desk, facing him with her arms crossed.

“No, of course not.” Helplessly, he searched for the words. His mind raced through every word in his personal lexicon. “It’s just that— When I see— Oh, let me think. . .” he mumbled, seeking to fill the silence he had created.

“Is the subject difficult, the tests too hard, something not clicking for you?” The teacher prompted, still giving Lionel her full attention.

“No, nothing like that. It’s just distracting,” He stuttered.

“What’s distracting?” Her openness made Lionel want to tell her more.

“The artwork, the artists, the history, I just get lost thinking about it all.” Lionel fought the urge to clam up.

“Lost in the artwork?” His teacher quirked one brow up, but she stayed silent until he chose to respond.

“Um. Exactly, yes. Lost in the scene, lost in a dream.” He snapped to attention, studying her face. Did she understand?

“A daydream. That’s all?” Mrs. Sanderson didn’t look shocked like he’d thought she would.

“I’m working on it.” Lionel reflexively defended himself. He folded his arms across his chest, pulling away toward the exit.

“I want to help you any way I can, but—”

“Listen, if I knew how to focus, I would,” Lionel snapped. As much as he wanted to look away, he kept his eyes steady on her face. Mrs. Sanderson only looked shocked for a moment.

“I’m sure you’re concerned about your GPA, I understand.” She was barely phased by his outburst. “I just wanted to make sure the cause was not negligence.” She opened the center drawer of her desk and pulled out a stack of papers bound with a silver clip. “This is the first chapter of my class notes. They are lengthy, but everything on the test is directly from this packet.” Lionel held his breath; he felt like she was offering him the holy grail. His teacher’s pause seemed like an eternity. “If you’re telling me the truth, you’ll put effort into studying for the tests and the final instead of tutoring sessions each week. She slid the packet across the desk toward Lionel. Tentatively, he placed his hands on the top page as if she were having him swear on Scripture.

“It’s amazing, thank you so much,” Lionel gasped, pulling the papers across the desk toward his chair. “This is exactly what I needed, thank you.” With his mouth open and his eyes bulging, Lionel shoved the packet into his leather shoulder bag.

“If you pass the quiz on Monday, you’ll get the rest. I just need to make sure you’re learning this material and not just using this as a get out of jail free card.” Mrs. Sanderson slid her drawer shut.

“I will not let you down.” Lionel must have repeated his gratitude a hundred times as he took steps backward through the doorway and finally scampered down the hall with his deliverance in hand.

Chapter 7: Afternoon Appointment

Lionel had barely contained his giddiness and relief even when he reached the brick edifice the school assigned as his home. The familiar clang of the door followed him to the elevator, and a ding from each floor echoed around his head until he jingled the keys to the door of the room he was forced to share with an overtired sophomore named Greg. For many reasons, Lionel felt unbearably compressed in the concrete cubicle, not least of which was from sneaking around politely since his roommate was always sleeping. He twisted the knob to pull the door closed as quietly as possible and didn't flip the light switch.

He spent as little time as possible in the oppressive domicile. Mainly, he felt stifled there, and secondarily, he liked to avoid interacting with most people. One of Greg's legs hung off the side of the top bunk and his mouth was wide open. Lionel dodged the dangling appendage as he changed from his dress pants and polo shirt into sweatpants and a t-shirt.

Before leaving, he took out the note packet. It was long for only one chapter, but that didn't scare him nearly as much as his own cluttered and patchy notes on the desk. He took his notebook out and tossed it onto the desk. He tucked the packet back into his leather shoulder bag with some highlighters.

After five minutes of searching for his wallet only to realize he'd already put it in his bag, he was ready to leave. At the last minute he stuck his notebook back into the bag. Finally, he grabbed the key from the lock before closing the door gently.

Lionel traced his usual route from his room to the back entrance of the campus. He'd taken this walk so many times that his feet carried him there while his mind wandered.

He barely noticed the clock tower ringing beside him as he walked through the center of campus. Nine deafening chimes resonated a few feet from Lionel, but what broke him from his daydream was the quick and quiet tweet of his phone ringing. He shrugged it off at first, but when it completed a full ring and then a second call came in right after, he felt a stab of panic in his chest. No one ever called twice, and with that thought he panicked, realizing who was calling. Frantically, he swiped the green button and answered. “Sharon! I am so sorry that I’m late, I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“It’s okay, this is the first time we’ve rescheduled, so I understand why you forgot.” She immediately dissolved his stress. She had a habit of defusing the bomb that was always getting ready to explode in his stomach. He thanked her profusely and practically ran to her office. He was sweating by the time he raced through the door, only fifteen minutes late.

“I called you sooner than I would have most patients; being less than ten minutes early is so abnormal for you, Mr. Basque.” Sharon smiled at him as she finished pouring water in a pot on the windowsill. “It’s his monthly feeding time.” she motioned to the cactus.

Lionel mustered a polite smile. “I’m so sorry I’m late, it’ll never happen again. I can explain—”

“It’s okay. It happens to the best of us.” Her gentle smile almost convinced him that she meant it. Lionel breathed out heavily, reminding himself he didn’t need to form a defense. Before he could contemplate more she asked, “What’s happening in your life right now?”

He reached into his bag, happy for the distraction. “I have this packet to study.”

“Are these your notes?” She placed the cup of water on the counter and walked over to Lionel.

“No, they’re from the teacher.” Lionel sat down in the chair he sat in every week.

“Why did she give those to you?” Sharon sat in her chair facing him and steadied her notebook on her lap.

“She’s been tutoring me in her office the last few weeks.” He was looking down at his hands and picking at his fingernails.

“You haven’t mentioned that before.” Sharon did not let him get away with anything.

“I guess I just forgot.”

“That sounds like it might not be the whole truth.”

“I’m not sure what else you want,” Lionel stated.

“Why do you think you told me today?” She would take a Socratic approach whenever he wasn’t getting her point. He would indulge her, usually.

“It was right before the session, since we rescheduled.” Lionel could feel something else nagging just behind the surface, but he wasn’t ready to face it.

“How do you feel about your teacher giving you the notes?” She changed the subject with another question. Lionel wondered if she felt he couldn’t handle the truth.

“I’m relieved. I threw away my notes before coming here.” He crossed his legs.

“How do you feel about throwing away your notes?” At Sharon’s probing question, Lionel shifted in his seat, still struggling to meet her eye.

“Relieved.” He almost gritted his teeth, but he was trying to convince himself.

“Do you believe that?” It was like she could read his mind.

“Of course, I just said it.”

“Many times what we say and think on the surface is not actually the truth. Are you hiding something from yourself? Or just from me?”

“Well, it’s not like my notes are worth anything, or like they could help me pass the test anyway.” Lionel inched closer to the truth. He uncrossed one leg and swung the other one over it.

“Why do you say that?” Sharon leaned forward but stayed silent, leaving Lionel space to talk. He took a moment to stare at his shoes.

He looked up at her and leaned forward. “Okay, what do you want here?” He laced his fingers together around his crossed knee, pulling his leg into his chest. Sharon looked at him blankly. Lionel tried to keep the stare, but he looked down at his knee after a few seconds. “Fine.” He threw up his hands and slouched back. “Everything was going well, I didn’t want you to know I was failing at something.”

“What grades did you get on the tests?” Her eyebrows crinkled together, and she tilted her head to the side.

“I failed to take good notes in class,” he clarified. Sharon raised both eyebrows but said nothing. “She told me that today!” He protested, it almost came out as a whine.

“Remember, getting help does not mean you’ve failed.” Sharon’s observation seemed random at first.

“She told me I zone out in class.”

“But she also gave you notes. Why do you think that is?” Sharon crossed her legs and sat back in her chair. She tapped her pen silently on the cloth arm of the chair. Lionel studied her hand, he was starting to sweat.

“I lied.” Lionel pulled his spiral notebook from his bag and slapped it onto the table.

“We were talking about the notes your teacher gave you.” Sharon redirected him, scribbling a word in her notes.

“Fine. I did not fail because my teacher helped me.” He closed his eyes to avoid her catching him rolling them.

“Absolutely. You’re right.” Sharon smiled, wrinkles stood out around her eyes and nose. “You said your life has been going smoothly lately. Why is that different from the past?”

“Because I needed therapy.” Lionel’s voice was flat.

“There is truth in that. Therapy is a step of self love.”

“Getting help is self love?” Lionel met her eye.

“Right. So, let’s go back. How do you feel about your notes?”

“You’re saying the notes are part of getting help, like therapy? Right?”

“There is no right answer, but that is a good connection.” She laid her notebook on her lap and crossed her arms, looking down at her notes.

“I guess I’ll focus on the good news; I’ll have notes to study until I die.” Lionel glanced up to see if she would correct him, but it seemed like she would let this slide.

“What else is good news?” She picked the pen up and clicked it.

“I am practicing self love.” Lionel poked out his bottom lip and made a sarcastic heart with his hands.

“Say that again like you mean it.” She prompted, looking at him through scrunched brows. Lionel struggled to form the words in seriousness. After a few tries he had done it with a straight face. “We’ll work on that,” Sharon said with a full eye roll. “Let’s go over some study techniques.”

The next fifteen minutes dragged on as Lionel tried to convince himself that he would pass the class and that getting help was not a failure. It wasn’t until the end of the conversation that Lionel began to think about his inadequacies again. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Lionel?” It wasn’t until Sharon said his name that he realized he had been lost in thought for a moment. He looked up, trying to focus.

“You know, I’ve only ever failed once before.”

“You’re thinking about your parents?” Sharon flipped to the beginning of her notes.

“We both know that’s what made me like this.”

“Like what?” She was looking right into his eyes again.

“Anxious. . . and I don't know, scared of making decisions?” Lionel scratched his forehead, obscuring his face.

"Do you think you'll make the wrong decisions?" Sharon did not look away when he wanted her to.

"Yeah, I mean, look at my mom and dad. They didn't make the right decision."

"And they learned from it, they're both with their Matches now." Her raised eyebrow awaited a predictable response.

"If they had been patient until they found their Matches, I wouldn't exist." Lionel easily made eye contact after he said this. "Wouldn't it be easier if they'd been patient?" The question hung in the air like wet laundry.

“It is difficult to think about the ‘what ifs’ of life sometimes,” she responded after some thought. “We just aren’t meant to know the answers to every question—”

“But that doesn’t mean there aren’t answers, somewhere.” Lionel pushed the words through clenched teeth and like a child saying a forced apology.

"Right, you've heard it enough times, now listen to it." She stared darts at him. Lionel looked quickly at the floor. He traced the swirling patterns with his eyes.

“I promise, I really have been more kind to myself recently. Making jokes about it comes naturally.” Lionel twirled the strings of his jacket uncomfortably.

“How recently?” she asked with one eyebrow raised. Lionel sensed that this question was a trap, so he took a moment to think about his answer.

“Well, the last I really remember wishing I was never born was when Georgia got engaged.” Lionel tried out the blunt response. He glanced at Sharon to read her reaction.

“You thought she could be your Match, right?” Sharon matched his bluntness, so Lionel wasn’t sure why he was surprised. He had stopped letting himself think about his own Match. It would only get his hopes up.

“We were just friends, I was sad that she would be busy.” He couldn’t look at her eyes anymore.

“Is sadness a reason to wish your parents hadn’t been patient?” She always thrust him into the spotlight where he could not ignore any part of himself. “Let’s focus on your feelings after the wedding. Remember how you felt after the wedding?”

“She looked so happy, it all looked so easy,” Lionel mused, nearly getting lost in the memory.

“You want to wait for what Georgia and your parents have now that they trusted the Matchmaker enough to wait for the right time. We know that we are made to be loved, and evidence shows that the Matchmaker works when and where we need it.” Sharon uncrossed her legs and flipped to the cover of her notebook. Silence spread through the room like perfume.

“Why everyone but me?” Lionel asked after a minute.

“You have the desire for love. That means you can be silent and wait; the Matchmaker will fulfill his promise in his time.” Sharon nodded and smiled, her steady gaze was reassuring. Lionel glanced at the clock even though he knew it was time to wrap up by Sharon’s actions. “I want to give you an assignment this week while you study,” she said, ripping a piece of paper from the back of the notebook. She began to scribble while she slowly said what she was writing out loud, “Think about what you value about yourself.” She wrote the date and handed Lionel the page. “Feel free to record any thoughts for our next session on the page too.”

“Thank you, I think I can do that.” Lionel resisted protesting because he knew it wouldn’t change anything. Of course, she could never force him to complete any assignments, but he wondered if she secretly knew that he barely had a choice in completing any assignment whether it was for a grade or not. He wouldn’t be able to bear the look of disappointment. Sharon patted him on the back as he left her office, letting the door close behind him.

Chapter 8: A Scholar and a Stranger

When he stepped onto the street, the afternoon sun was high in the sky. The rescheduled session had only been a detour on his walk.

He had discovered a nature reserve just down the road from the college, and he would go there to study every weekend. After a short walk, he was walking through the black and gold arch that marked the entrance. The familiar path carried him gently past the information center, the well-curated section of the reserve stopped at the top of the small hill where the path opened into a large circle. Eight picnic tables rested in the shade of the trees around the edge of the courtyard. The bright and spacious area made Lionel's mind feel clear; it was the perfect place to study calculus. He hoped it would be the same for art, even though the class was impossible.

He settled at his favorite picnic table. Large trees on either side cast it into a square of shade where Lionel felt secluded. A sound broke him from his thoughts. Lionel recognized Pat just by the familiar *swish* of the broom.

"Hey, Pat!" Lionel called from the shadows as he shrugged his backpack off his shoulder. Pat looked around for a moment before spotting Lionel.

"Ah, my favorite young scholar!" Pat bellowed, picking up his broom and hustling over to the table. "How are ya?"

"I'm doing alright," Lionel said, looking up at Pat. "You'll never guess why I'm here." He reached into his bag.

"Conducting your soldiers, eh?" Pat always surprised Lionel with how well he listened, he dropped the pages back into the bag and sat up and looked into the custodian's eyes.

“I wish. I’m not even studying for my major-related classes this year.” Lionel felt his face turn red when he remembered taking up far too much of the lovely man’s time when Pat had asked about his major. It had been months, but Pat clearly remembered the analogy Lionel had passionately spilled out.

“You’ve trained your soldiers already?” Pat smiled. Lionel felt his embarrassment fade, reminded why he was comfortable telling Pat how he thought about calculus.

“I guess so,” Lionel said with a slight tweak at the corner of his mouth. He looked down to his bag, “Now this,” he lifted the stack up slowly and dramatically slapped it on the table, “is the new battle. History of Art.”

“Oh, that sounds like an easy defeat!” Pat settled in, resting his weight on his broom.

“More like my Waterloo.” Lionel rolled his eyes.

“So, what was it you told me. . .” Pat tapped his chin. “The numbers follow strict orders! Well, surely the facts of History would make a fine army.” Lionel smiled, not only did Pat remember the metaphor, but he was building on it.

“Well, I guess words are different from numbers for me. I don’t get lost in the numbers, they don’t pull me in like the art does.” Lionel met Pat’s confused look. “Look here.” Lionel flipped to a picture in the notes and slid it toward Pat. “I love this one. You know, the artist painted this one week before he died of a lung disease. Do you think he knew he was dying? Look at the swirls of the torrential sea. Does that tiny boat represent the way he felt as he lost control of his health?” What if he—

“I see what you mean,” Pat chuckled. “Looks like you need a study partner to keep you on track.”

“Oh, no. I can only study alone.” Lionel grimaced. Why did he suddenly feel like he was being attacked?

“Well, just think about it.” Pat touched Lionel’s shoulder, and the tension disappeared.

“Either way, you’ll ace the class. Soon you’ll be slapping the final on the desk like a fresh peace treaty,” Pat said with a broad smile.

“I hope so.” Lionel scratched his neck and looked away. A sudden beep made them both glance at Pat’s wrist, he lifted it up to inspect the time.

“Well, good luck with your studies.” Pat leaned the broom against the table and stretched out his arms and legs. “I gotta get back to the job.” They said their farewell wishes and goodbyes before Pat began to sweep away.

Just as Lionel was ready to start studying, Pat turned suddenly, “Have you ever seen an advertisement for this place?” He motioned around the reserve with his free hand.

“Like a flier?”

“I reckon so, but she didn’t have it with her.” Pat scratched his head, looking around.

“She?” Lionel pulled one leg from under the table and over the bench so he could look up the path.

“Yeah, long red hair, kinda messy-like.” He looked back at Lionel, “I guess she’s gone now. I wish I could have seen what she was talking about.” Lionel and Pat shrugged at each other before waving goodbye again.

Lionel returned to the packet on the table. He set a goal to finish fifteen pages before leaving. The atmosphere was perfect. A slight breeze rustled the trees and the sun offered plenty of indirect light while the shade brought necessary coolness. Lionel took a deep breath and stretched his arms high to get the blood flowing. Hunched over the table, he began to read.

After reading the same sentence five times, Lionel rubbed his eyes. He looked back down and tried to make sense of the words on the page. *Right, last time I got distracted by the word classical. It's funny how it can mean old or timeless . . .* Before he knew it, he was on the same derailed train as before. He rolled his eyes at himself, suppressing the urge to growl audibly even though no one was around.

His mind found a new track to wander as he heard the squealing brakes in the distance. Usually, the bus only stopped at the college, but this time he heard it rumble closer to the nature reserve. Lionel began to scold himself again until the bus caught his eye, and he looked toward the entrance.

He hadn't even noticed her pass, but she was already at the bottom of the path. Her legs stretched for miles, and wispy strands of hair blew around in the wind.

To Lionel's horror, she stopped and began to turn around in the middle of his observation. He tried to look away before she noticed him staring, but they momentarily locked eyes.

Chapter 9: Peace from the Provider

Vera was eager to get back to the bus. She was sure her bag was safe, but her heart still pounded every time she reached for it and found nothing there. She was about to walk up the street to the bus stop. Looking down at her hands, she contemplated keeping the pockets of desirable foliage and intricate pebbles, but her hands were starting to cramp, and the leaves were already beginning to dry out.

As Vera stood waiting, she emptied her pockets of leaves onto the concrete. The collection of colors, lines, and patterns had amazing variety. She had started to arrange them into a design when she heard the bus turn around the corner. It was headed right to her, and she felt guilty for not walking up the road to the college bus stop. The bus screeched to a halt in front of her and the door swooshed open.

“That was good timing.” Vera laughed as she stomped up the stairs. The shake and rattle of the bus seemed more aggressive after her peaceful walk.

“I’m nothing if not punctual.” Frank reached under his seat and dug around. “And that you would need this.” Her brown leather bag dangled from his upward stretched hand. Vera grabbed the bag too quickly, and Frank’s eyes widened.

“I knew it would be safe, but I was still anxious.” Vera grinned as she swung the bag to the corner of the bus seat. She sat in the front seat again, leaning forward to talk with Frank. “I talked about myself the whole way here. Tell me what’s new in your life.” She felt like she had given an order, why didn’t any words come out the way she meant them to?

“Well, you know it's just me and Sunbeam out on the farm. We’re getting along.” Frank had lived on the farm since he moved from his parents’ house. Suddenly, Vera was remembering all of his stories.

“Is she just as stubborn as ever?”

“Well, of course!” He glanced back at her with a wink, “That’s why she’s called an ass.” He whispered it with a snicker as if he was teaching her a naughty word. “You would always compare her to that boy . . . what was his name?”

Vera thought back through the years to any guys she had compared to Frank’s farm animal. “I wouldn’t even know, there were too many to remember.”

“You never told me there was more than one!” Frank exclaimed. Vera thought back to those years. Maybe she had been too ashamed to tell him she went on one date with about twenty guys during that time. Or maybe she had only talked to Frank when she was with one of the longer-term boyfriends.

“I guess I didn’t tell you. I always thought I would just find my Match and none of the others would matter.” She rubbed her forehead, struggling with her memory.

“I never understood any of that Match stuff,” Frank said quietly as he tugged the wheel to change lanes and pass a slow-moving van.

“Did you want a Match?” Vera blurted before she could stop herself. Frank did not speak for a moment, as he pulled the wheel to reorient the bus on a new street. With a loose grip, he let the wheel spin back to straighten the bus.

“When I was young, I thought about being like everyone else. I just couldn’t see myself with a Match. As I got older, I was busy, and finding a Match was never my priority.” He shrugged as he glanced over his shoulder out the window.

“I feel like every thought in my head is about Matching.” Vera slumped down in the seat.

“Everyone is made differently. Maybe when I die, I’ll know why I didn’t Match.” Frank didn’t look like he needed comfort when he said that, but Vera felt the need to reassure him.

“You won’t die any time soon.” She waved away his morose comment.

“I’ll die when I die. That could be any moment.” He always surprised her; anyone else would avoid talking about his own death. Frank was comfortable being alone or dead.

“How do you do that?” She asked without much thought.

“Do what?” He glanced quickly back at her, keeping a careful eye on the roads. He maneuvered the bus with expert precision.

“How are you so calm about everything?” Vera was almost jealous that he had never worried about a Match. Would she rather wait for a Match, or not think about it at all?

“I don’t know. I guess the Provider gave me peace instead of a partner.”

“You believe in the Provider?” Vera hadn’t talked about beliefs with Frank before.

“Yeah. People are scared to talk about that. Here’s a secret though, they always try to ignore what they don’t understand,” Frank said.

“What do you do, then?” Vera added, “With what you don’t understand?”

“I always try to explore it instead. The Provider isn’t hiding anything from you.”

“I wish I could believe that.” Vera studied the floor. Frank’s wisdom amazed her.

“Just give it some time. You’ll learn what’s important when you need to.” Frank turned onto a familiar street. The block looked slightly different from the vantage point of the road, but in the distance she spotted the neon coffee shop sign.

Realizing the trip was nearing an end, Vera grabbed her bag and started digging around for something. “Oh, before I forget, I wanted to ask you. . .it should be in here. . . where is it?”

“What are you looking for?” He asked with quick glances away from the road to look at the floor around his seat.

“A paper. It’s folded and yellowish with cursive handwriting on the front.” Vera ducked her head to look under the bus seats, but she found nothing but grime and trash. “Did anyone else get on here while I was gone?”

“Of course, it is a public bus.” Frank was slowing the bus as he approached the stop. “Now that I think about it though, an older woman gave the bag to me. She was probably old enough to be your mom. Dark hair, not very tall. That’s all I can remember, I was looking at the road.” Vera stood up and patted him on the back as he opened the door in front of her studio.

“It was just a paper, it’s not important. Don’t worry about it.” Vera swung her bag over her head and bounded down the bus stairs, but she couldn’t shake the feeling of disappointment. She reached into her bag, searching for her keys with her hand as she turned back to the bus.

“I’ll let you know if I see anything with your name on it,” Frank called over the grumble of the bus.

“Have you seen my keys?” she yelled. Frank shook his head, taking a few more moments to search around his seat. They both waved and called goodbye over the roar of the massive beast before Frank pulled it away from the sidewalk and headed down the street.

Vera’s heart was thumping as she approached the door, half hoping it was unlocked. She slowly reached for it, gritting her teeth with anticipation. Whether it was locked or unlocked she had a problem, but at least she could lock it without a key. When the knob easily turned in her hand, she felt both relieved and anxious.

At the thought of anyone being able to enter the studio in her absence, Vera glanced up and down the afternoon-shaded street. She quickly pulled the door open and slammed it shut behind her, flipping the lock and the lightswitch as quickly as possible.

Chapter 10: Unplanned Confessions

With relief, she counted eight paintings still covered by an old ballerina sheet from her childhood bed. She was glad her mom had forced her to keep the sheet. Nothing else in the studio held much value. With relief, Vera pulled out her favorite painting. It had started as a still life sketch of her stuffed animals, but she had ended up painting an enchanted bedroom scene. Fairies peeked from under the bed and sneaked through the air with jewelry and trinkets. Flowers bloomed from books spilling off the shelf, and moss grew on any undisturbed ledges. A bluebird peeped from high on top of the wardrobe.

“That is absolutely beautiful!” A breathy call startled Vera, who jerked around to see an unfamiliar silhouette behind her.

“Who are you?” Vera scrambled to her feet, her heart beating like a bass drum. For the second time that day, she reminded herself to get a bell.

“I’m your neighbor, don’t worry!” She cried, wringing her hands in front of her. The lady’s black hair was tied back with a handkerchief. Dark curls around her face framed her plump cheeks.

“Please knock before coming in. You startled me.” Vera placed a hand over her thumping heart. Once she had looked at her better, she recognized the woman she had vaguely seen through the window next door. Calming her breathing, she held out a hand.

“So sorry, it won’t happen again” she said with a gentle smile. “I’m Laura Charleston, I own All Sewn Up right next door. It is so nice to meet you, Vera!” Laura seemed nice enough, but Vera had an uneasy feeling in her stomach.

"What brings you here, tonight?" she mustered as politely as possible.

"I just saw you come in and I wanted to say hi, neighbor!" Laura chirped as she moved to look closer at the painting. "You're so talented," Laura mused.

"Thank you." Vera was starting to warm up to Laura's flattery. "It's my most recent, and I think my favorite."

"I can see why. Your shading is accurate and the details are gorgeous." Laura's smile lit up the evening-dimmed room. Many people looked at her art and complimented it, but most of them followed the compliment with, "I can't even draw a stick figure!"

"Are you an artist?" Vera wondered, sliding the painting back under the sheet and standing, turning to face Laura.

"Me? No," She chuckled, blushing. "My son is a graphic designer. I actually just came from visiting him at the dorm. I'm surrounded by artists today! You know . . ." Laura looked around the studio, then she looked Vera up and down. "Oh, nevermind, I won't interfere." Vera couldn't hide her bewilderment, so Laura quickly asked, "Maybe you know Greg?"

"Oh, what year is he?" Vera had graduated with some of the students who were in their third year now. Laura laughed awkwardly, and Vera looked up at her with a question on her face.

"Well, he's. . . sort of spread out his classes more than most students might have wanted to." Laura slowly pieced together the sentence, and Vera got the sense that she was picking her words carefully.

"My best friend is taking her time in college, so I understand." Vera smiled gently as Laura looked up, her eyes lit up and the corner of her mouth twitched.

"I'm impressed." Laura took a step closer and lowered her voice, "Most people think moving quickly is the only way to go, but there's no rush."

"I guess Clara taught me something," Vera said fondly.

“That name sounds familiar. . .” She let the sentence trail off, and she looked as if she were staring at nothing for a moment before she shook her head a little. “Oh, I can’t remember. You both have very beautiful names. I always wished I’d had a girl.”

“You only have boys?” Vera felt the conversation getting longer, so she looked around the room for seats.

“I have eight.” Her eyes sparkled when she mentioned her sons. Vera crossed the room when she spotted what she needed, careful to stay attentive so she didn’t look rude.

“That is a lot,” she said as she dragged the chair. “Would you like to sit?” Vera motioned to the single chair she owned.

“Oh, just for a moment!” Laura looked toward the door. “My oldest, Gregory, is a tremendous help. He works very hard.” Vera cleared off the stool by her easel which was more often a table than a seat. “

“Is the shop easier than the boys?” Vera joked. “I only have one brother, and I don’t think I could handle a weekend with him.”

“Yes, the shop is much easier than juggling all of the boys. But it doesn’t bring as much joy.” Laura laughed. “I’m thinking of closing the shop to spend more time at home.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, that’s unfortunate.” Vera looked down at her fingers, one hand picking at her nails on the other.

“It isn’t.” Laura’s bluntness made Vera look up, surprised.

“Oh?”

“I’ve always had enough for me and the boys, even without the shop I know we’ll be taken care of.” She smiled and placed her hand on her chest. Vera couldn’t help but let out a laugh which made Laura glance up at her.

“I wish my life was like that.” Vera tried to explain.

“Do you have a Match yet?” The question seemed to come from nowhere. Vera laughed again, cynically.

“No, just plenty of heartbreak.” She rolled her eyes.

“Well, I found my Match at fifteen. We got married at eighteen. He died two years ago from a mysterious illness.” If Vera had been telling the story, she knew she would not have had the serene expression that Laura did.

“I’m so sorry.” She couldn’t think of anything else to say. Vera remembered her own devastation when she had broken up with James, her longest, hardest, and most recent relationship. “I try not to think about my ex. I can’t imagine what losing someone after building a family would be like.”

“It isn’t easy.” Laura shook her head.

“Then how did you do it?” Vera pressed, needing the secret.

“I didn’t do anything. The Provider did.” Laura’s confidence surprised Vera. People usually didn’t talk to strangers about beliefs like this, yet Vera had talked about the Provider twice in one day with almost strangers. She scratched her head, her eyebrows deeply creased. Laura pressed a button on her watch, started to gather her bag, and sat up in the folding chair.

Vera leaned forward quickly. “Wait.” Laura paused, even though it was obvious she needed to go. Vera was still struggling with herself over whether to even say this aloud. “I’ve never told anyone this before,” she said, shaking her head. “I– I think the Provider got me this studio,” she blurted.

“I’m sure he did.” Laura grinned.

“But that doesn’t make any sense. I didn’t do anything. Actually, I’ve done everything wrong.” Every guy she had tried to force a connection with flashed through her mind.

“You decided to listen and take this step.” She looked around the studio, nodding, “and it looks like He is already helping it to thrive.”

“My mom said it was a dump.”

“She just wants the best for her daughter.” Laura chuckled. Vera did not correct her, even though she knew that was not her mother’s problem. “And maybe she doesn’t know that He can make anything beautiful when we let Him.

“How can I obey someone that doesn’t talk to me?”

“Let’s go back to you getting this studio. Tell me about that.” Laura sat back and crossed her legs.

“You aren’t my therapist.” Vera lifted one eyebrow.

“You already told me something you never told anyone else.” Laura shrugged. “And I told you about my dead husband, so I think we can talk freely now.” She winked, and Vera couldn’t think of a counterargument.

“Fine.” Vera let out a heavy sigh. “One day, my family had been fighting all day. I couldn’t wait to get out, but I was flat broke.”

“What changed for you?” Laura sounded like a real therapist.

“I can’t remember, something reminded me of the stories my grandma used to tell me about the Provider. I remembered her always telling me to pray when I needed something. Of course, that sounds too good to be true, so I had my doubts.” Vera paused. She felt her face grow warm as she thought about what she would say next.

“Did you ask Him?” Laura’s question made Vera feel like she could read minds.

“How did you know that?” Her eyes were wide with curiosity, but she didn’t wait for an answer. “I did ask Him, I said I had nothing left and He was my last option. I begged Him to solve my problem. I didn’t have a clue what I even wanted to happen.”

“I had no idea what I was asking for as a teenager, but then He brought me someone that saved my life.” Laura stared into the distance with a slight smile.

“Then my friend found the ad for this studio, and it was ridiculously cheap.”

“Where did she find a deal like that?” Laura asked like she knew the answer already. Vera thought for a moment.

“I’m not sure. It’s perfect though, I had enough in savings to cover the first six months. I’ve been saving instead of going to college.” Vera tried to gauge what Laura was thinking from her expression.

“He has big plans for you here, if you keep looking to him for answers.” Laura picked her purse up and set it on her lap, she began to dig through it, searching carefully.

“Everything worked together perfectly, I can’t think it was a coincidence.” Vera mused, looking around the studio. Suddenly she also saw the ways it was already beginning to thrive like Laura said. The door had dried into an eye-catching sunshine color, spread out rugs brought a homey touch, and she could see the stars from her desk. Looking into the sky, Vera was amazed again at the vast creation around her.

“I felt the same way when I met Samuel.” Laura smiled.

“Do you think finding my Match will feel the same way?”

“It might,” Laura stated. “But it might not. We aren’t always meant to know everything.” She looked at her watch again after this statement.

“Do you have to go? I’m sorry I’ve kept you here.”

“No worries, I’m happy to finish the conversation.” She looked up and smiled to drive her point home. “But I do need to get home to my boys.”

“Of course, I didn’t mean to make you late!” Vera felt bad about taking up her time. The two said their goodbyes, and Vera had forgotten any discomfort she’d had from when Laura first arrived.

“Have a lovely night, dear,” Laura said, flipping the deadbolt, opening the door, and closing it behind her.

With that, the unsure feeling flooded back into the pit of Vera’s stomach. For a minute, she could only stare at the door. She shuddered and rushed over to slide the deadbolt closed. Her eyebrows were still tightly turned down in the center as she contemplated the bizarre situation. She glanced around the room for an explanation, and spotted something that made her heart pound. In the chair Laura had just occupied were Vera’s keys.

Chapter 11: Discoveries at Home

Almost frantic, she ran around the room turning off lights and gathering everything she had set aside to bring home. On the street, she locked the door behind her and tried the knob; it was solid. In the dark speckled sky, the moon was low on the horizon, and the cool breeze made Vera tug her jacket together and hug it close around her. The leather bag she had left on the bus was secured over her neck and under her jacket.

On the corner, the neon sign was off for the night, so Vera felt comfortable placing her hands over her eyes like binoculars and looking through the glass. Inside, the shop looked like any other restaurant in the area with a smattering of tables and a menu written in chalk marker above the front counter.

The swirling cursive heading on the menu stopped Vera in her tracks. She paused for a moment, then placed all her effort into walking home quickly. It did not take long as her long strides and empty arms allowed her to move unencumbered.

“Don’t slam my door!” Her mom greeted. Vera leaned her back against the door and slowly allowed herself to sink to the floor. Her knees would have touched her chin if she leaned forward.

“What were you doing in the coffee shop today?” Vera looked up at her mom, trying to catch her eye.

“What coffee shop?” Her mother was changing summer decorations on the coffee table for fall ones.

“You *are* hiding something from me!” Vera stood suddenly and her mom glanced over with wide eyes. “I saw you go into the coffee shop on the end of my street, right after you refused to tell me how you knew where my studio was!”

Vera could almost see the excuses forming, but just as she looked like she was going to talk, a shriek erupted through the house. Vera and her mom barely flinched. Joshua slid into the room on his knees with a toy guitar. The black and white toy could play real notes, but mercifully without strings to break. Joshua had begged their parents for it a few birthdays before.

“What’s Veer crying about now -ow -ow?” He screeched as if he were singing the lyrics to a heavy metal song.

“Go away or I’ll smash that thing!” Vera’s punch was inches from his nose when he dodged her swing.

“Vera! Your father is trying to sleep!” Her mother quieted her.

“Me! What about him?” She motioned toward her brother’s deafening acoustics. But Vera gave up her protest before she had really started; her mother had taken Josh’s side ever since the first time Vera had been caught slipping out of the house. Josh was only four years her younger, but he had learned something each time Vera had gotten in trouble. Now, he escaped reprimands with observed knowledge which Vera had had to learn through punishment.

“He’s just pursuing his passions.” It seemed her mother had regained her confidence. “Isn’t that what you’re doing instead of helping around the house?” The cold smile was the final blow to Vera’s patience. She and her mother had done this countless times, each time Vera was left questioning how she had lost the argument. Her mother was never in the wrong, and she had perfected the art of redirecting a conversation. Against her better judgment, Vera couldn’t help but argue against the clear prejudice.

“You yelled at me for noise, not for renting a studio.” She folded her arms.

“Now I’m supposed to just let you wake your father at all hours of the night?”

“That’s obviously not—”

“You just said I shouldn’t have told you not to yell. Do you want to fight about the yelling or about your waste of money?”

“The studio is not a waste of money, it will pay for itself,” Vera mumbled.

“Oh, will the studio get a job and start making money?” Mother crooned.

“I’ll sell my paintings.”

“And the money will immediately go to rent.” The sickly smile remained plastered on her mom’s face. Maybe her mother was right.

“So I should have stayed here my whole life?” Vera retaliated.

“You’re still here now, aren’t you?”

“Why do you hate me being here? I’m your daughter.” Vera’s eyes were locked on the floor, unable to make eye contact.

“Adults are supposed to go to college and get a job so they can move out. When are you going to do any of that?” Perhaps deep inside her mother was concerned for her child’s material wealth, but Vera knew from experience that she was more worried about how she would use Vera’s room once it was empty.

“Hopefully soon.” Vera did not wait for a response before leaving to go to her room. She closed the door like a shield as she tried to regain her breath.

Looking around the walls at years of pencil drawings, watercolor paintings, and other art projects, Vera began to get lost in the torrential events of the day. How had she gotten to this point? She tried to think back to the morning, but it felt like days ago. Before long she was pulling out her phone to text Clara.

Vera had known Clara would be over soon, but the tapping on her window still startled her. “That was fast,” she remarked, watching Clara wrestle her limbs through the narrow window. Vera had changed into fuzzy pajama pants and an oversized T-shirt. She hugged a stuffed lion, sitting on her bed with her back against the wall.

“Did that thing get smaller?” she panted. Now that Vera thought about it, it had been a few years since Clara had needed to sneak through the window.

“Maybe that’s why we stopped meeting like this.” She blushed, knowing full well she had been blowing Clara off for boys the last few years.

“Next time you’re coming outside.” Clara didn’t take the opportunity to bring up the past. “Why am I here?”

“I need you to tell me about this morning when you got to the studio.” Vera enjoyed not having to waste time on pointless pleasantries with Clara.

“I got there like five minutes before you did. I was just teasing you about being late.”

“So you unlocked the door?”

Clara scratched her chin, silent for a moment. “Yes, I remember I couldn’t figure out which way to turn it because you unlocked it every time yesterday.”

“What about the letter?” At Vera’s question, Clara’s eyes lit up.

“You’re still thinking about it?” Clara’s grin spread across her face slowly.

“It’s not the only weird thing that has happened today,” Vera admitted. Clara leaned forward, her wide eyes and smile were almost frightening. “I left my bag on the bus, and the letter was gone when I got it back. Frank was there the whole time, and he says he didn’t see the letter fall out. He did say an old lady gave it back to him, do you think she could have taken it?” She sat up straighter. “Then, there was a man at the Nature Reserve who said the exact—”

“Wait, stop!” Clara squealed. “You went to the place from the ad?” Her jaw dropped.

“It was a quick decision. It was pretty, but there was nothing there.” Vera explained as quickly as she could.

“There had to have been something there,” she whined.

“There were leaves and rocks, an old guy, some picnic tables . . . oh, and a guy studying.”

Vera stared into space trying to remember anything else important.

“What kind of guy?” Clara was far too excited.

“He was an old janitor. He knew the exact words from that advertisement he claimed he’d never seen.” She hugged her plushie tighter.

“No! I mean the studying guy!” Clara pulled her sleeve over her hand.

“Oh, I barely looked at him.”

“You should have looked at him! What if he was cute? Now you’ll never see him again!”

Clara bounced on the edge of her seat.

“Did you hear me about the old guy though?”

“Yeah. What do you mean they don’t put out ads? You saw one just today.” Clara went along with the subject change.

“I know!” They were both whispering at the top of their lungs. “That’s not all though. My mom knew where the studio was, that letter had my full name on it, Laura let herself in and left my keys behind!”

“Who’s Laura?” Clara stared at the floor and began chewing on the sleeve of her shirt.

“She owns the store next to mine.” Vera waved away the question casually. “Do you think my mom knows everyone on that street? Did she give Laura the key?” When Clara didn’t respond, Vera glanced at her. Her face had gone pale, and she was no longer looking at Vera. She still chewed her sleeve, and Vera noticed her forehead begin to glisten. “What’s wrong?”

Clara snapped to attention and mustered a weak smile. “I’m sorry. I need to go to the bathroom.” Clara got up and walked to the window.

“You can’t use my bathroom?” Vera looked at Clara like she was crazy.

“No, I need my, uh, brush. I mean I need my pills. Er, I’m going to my own bathroom. I’m sorry.” She was mumbling excuses as she lifted the window and stuck a foot out. She slithered out easier than she had gotten in, and she was gone before Vera could contemplate what had just happened.

Vera collapsed into the pile of stuffed animals and pillows on her bed, thinking about the strange and sudden departure. After a few moments, she shook her head and stood. The day had been too long and too weird.

Vera looked at the disheveled closet and open drawers with clothes spilling out to decide what to wear the next day. Before she found anything she liked, she groaned and rolled to face the wall. Thoughts of the next day were haunting, she wished she could forget everything.

Perhaps the morning would bring some clarity; she just needed to sleep on it. There was an explanation for everything, she thought as she climbed under the covers. Then, drifting off to sleep, an echo from the day danced around her mind. *We aren’t always meant to know everything.*

Chapter 12: Questioning the Past

When she opened her eyes the next morning, Vera was not blessed with amnesia. Memories of the confusing knot of events felt like a smack in the face after only a few minutes of consciousness. She wanted to roll over and return to the land of the not quite living, but laying silently only amplified the assumptions and conclusions she was trying not to jump to.

Each arm felt like it weighed a hundred pounds as she tried to awaken her muscles. Vera was motivated to get out of bed by promising herself she could buy coffee. Just the idea of avoiding her family in the kitchen energized her enough to get up. For the same reason, she contemplated leaving from the window like Clara had, but her mind flashed back to her friend's struggle the night before. Still, it might be better than a family meeting.

"Veer, are you in there?" her dad's strong, deep voice broke her from her thoughts, and she walked over to open the door. Even though Vera was taller than her mom and brother, she still peered up at her father.

"Are you going in late?" She asked, looking at his work clothes.

"No, I just got back actually." He fiddled with the button on his jacket. "I had a really early meeting, and I can finish the rest from home."

"That's why you slept so early last night?" She stepped out of the doorway and allowed him to step into the room.

"Yeah, but I was still awake when you got home." He stared into her eyes like he could read her mind. Vera huffed as she sat on the edge of her bed. Her dad sat in the wheeled desk chair.

"Are you here to lecture me? Because I—"

“No. I want to ask you about your studio. How is everything going?” Her father looked at her silently waiting for a response.

“I promise, I will be able to make money! I won’t come asking you for anything.” Vera could only imagine one reason he wanted to talk about the business. Her dad took a long pause.

“I’m just trying to ask about your new circumstances.” He looked up, his eyes moving across Vera’s face. “I’m sorry that you don’t expect that from me.” His sincerity made Vera’s defensiveness melt away.

“The studio is great. Today is my first day of trying to work from there.” She was fidgeting with the fringes of a blanket she’d had her whole life.

Her dad nodded. “You’ll do great. Don’t listen to your mother.” He smiled warmly. Pleasant conversations with Vera’s parents had been rare in the last few years. Now, she felt like she was finally doing something they didn’t have to yell at her about. Her mother didn’t seem to be able to break the habit, but Vera was relieved that her dad had started to see her effort. She thought back to her conversation with Laura. Everything really had begun to fall into place when she got the studio.

“Do you believe in a Provider?” She blurted. Her father tilted his head a bit, lowering his brows. Vera watched the thoughts move across his face as he took a minute. His eyebrows went up and down a few times before he answered.

“Your mother and I never did believe in all of that,” he said hesitantly. “Recently, I’m not so sure.” It was Vera’s turn to look puzzled.

“What changed your mind?”

“We’ve been unhappy for so long. I wonder if trusting the Matchmaker would have made a difference.” Each word was quieter than the last, he looked like he expected a slap on the hand for even thinking of it.

“I prayed for my future to start to work out.” Vera was lost in thought, staring at nothing. “Then everything with the studio just fell into place.” She looked up to see if her dad was looking at her like she was crazy. He was only nodding along, attentive.

“I have . . . a lot to think about.” Her father said, standing up. They never had long or emotional conversations; at least this one wasn’t long.

“Thank you.” Vera said before he left, but she wasn’t even sure what for.

“Have a good day at work, sweetheart.” He wrapped her in a firm hug before he headed down to his office. “Oh, your mother and Josh are at an appointment.” He called up the stairs, then he was gone, and the house was silent. Vera felt lighter than she had in years.

The conversation only punctuated the unusual happenings from the day before. Vera’s mind swam with new ideas and thoughts she hadn’t yet had time to process. She was relieved that no one would stop her as she walked through the house. How could she look at her mom after talking to her dad about his failed Match?

Closing the front door, Vera noticed the air was warmer than usual. She shrugged off her jacket and tied it around her waist. Pulling her phone out, she looked up the address of the Cantina. Then, she began trying to decipher her thoughts. She rubbed her forehead as she stopped to wait for a car to pass before the next block.

She'd been thinking so hard that she didn't notice she was walking her normal route. She only snapped back to reality when she was looking up at the neon sign above the coffee shop on the corner. Scolding herself for not paying attention, Vera still mused that she was already used to the walk. At least she was close to work.

Shrugging, Vera was certain this coffee would be better than nothing, and she reached for the handle of the heavy glass coffee shop door. Perhaps she would meet her other neighbor. Before she entered, she finally read the name of the shop. The glowing letters of the round sign read *The New Cantina*. Vera didn't know if she was in the right place or not, but something suddenly caught her eye.

She was sure this was the same guy from the reserve. His forehead glistened in the light and he looked shaky. He turned with a coffee in each hand. Vera was pulled to his dark, determined eyes darting back and forth under glinting glasses. Before she could look away, he glanced back into the restaurant. Vera wanted to look away, but they held eye contact for a moment before he turned to leave.

Chapter 13: Pranks and Passions

The grumbling bus waited at the end of the stone pathway. Lionel tried to look away, but he was mesmerized by the red-haired beauty. He had never seen anyone with hair so unruly and beautiful, and her eyes were hypnotic.

An angry look darkened her face while she was still looking back, and Lionel cringed back to reality, jerking his eyes to the ground. She boarded the bus, stopping to talk to the driver at the top of the stairs. It took an unusually long time for her to be seated, but Lionel found out why when the driver handed her something. They were too far away for Lionel to see clearly, and his curiosity ran rampant. The bus drove out of sight to turn around in the cul-de-sac at the end of the road, and soon it passed the entrance as it traveled back toward the college.

Lionel bent his elbow to check the time. He only felt like he had been sitting there for moments, but it was already late afternoon. If he counted the front and back, he had only studied five pages.

He flipped the leather cover of his bag and slid the packet back in. Maybe he should finally listen to Pat and study somewhere new or with someone new.

“Pat?” He called, wanting to say goodbye.

“Oh, hey, can you help me with something really quick?” Pat’s voice rang out from the woods nearby, but when Lionel looked around, he didn’t see the caretaker anywhere.

He stood to walk in the direction from which he heard the voice. Before he had walked across the entire courtyard, he jumped when Pat called again from much closer.

“Down here!” Pat yelled from inside a manhole just beyond the treeline. “Can you grab my tool bag? It should be around there somewhere.” Lionel looked around and saw the yellow bag a few feet away. He stepped over to grab it.

“What have you got in here?” Lionel groaned at the unexpected weight. Struggling for a few moments, Lionel failed to lift it. Pat’s laugh boomed in the small cellar room.

“I got you!” Pat popped up, cackling. He looked like he was buried up to his neck since Lionel could only see his head.

“No, I can do it.” Lionel pulled with both arms, growling.

“It’s a prank, son, you’ll never be able to lift it!” From under the ground, Pat pushed up a rod that was holding the bag to the ground. “I’m here alone all day, so I have my fun whenever people are here.” He was still chuckling to himself. “You should have seen that girl’s face when I jumped down here; she looked like she just talked to a ghost!”

“So the fake advertisement? Was that part of your prank on her?” Lionel’s eyes brightened; he thought he was a step ahead until Pat’s composure changed completely. His eyebrows lowered into deep valleys and his gaze became suddenly distant.

“No. . .” he said slowly. Pat scratched his chin, then looked up with his eyes wide.

“Maybe *she* pulled one over on *me!*” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“You don’t think the ad was real?”

“She mentioned it, but she never showed it to me.” Pat shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe she’s crackers.” He circled a finger pointed at his temple.

“Oh, hush. You barely know the girl.” Lionel had her image still lingering in his mind’s eye.

“She looked a little crazed, if I remember.” The twinkle was returning to Pat’s eye.

“You won’t get me. I don’t even care about her.” Lionel felt defensive again, so he threw a laugh at the end of the sentence to hide it. Pat didn’t seem to falter.

“You love her already.” Pat blinked his eyes repeatedly and pursed his lips.

“Okay, I’m going now.” Lionel turned before Pat could see the pink wash across his face.

“Alrighty, have a good evening.” Pat chuckled, climbing back down and disappearing.

Lionel felt an involuntary affectionate smile tug at the corner of his mouth.

The prank left his mind immediately, replaced by something fairer. From the forest to the gate, he imagined *her* taking the same path only minutes before. Just outside the gate, something caught his eye. On the sidewalk, colorful leaves looked purposefully placed. Unfinished, most of the materials sat in a pile, but the artwork resembled a heart.

As Lionel retraced his steps to the dorm, he slipped into the familiar future fantasy of romance. Except this time, the daydream wasn’t a faceless mystery woman. Now, the girl in his daydream had bright hair. Lionel approached her and picked up her hand, kissing it like a prince, and her sour glance turned to a dreamy gaze. She was wrapping her arms around his neck when Lionel was suddenly shoved off balance.

He looked back to see a jogger waving his apology. His face looked sincere, so Lionel believed it was an accident. Glancing at his surroundings, Lionel realized he was about to miss his turn onto campus. It didn’t take long to get to the dorm, especially when he didn’t take an hour-long detour in the middle as he had on the way there. He turned onto campus and followed the path past the clock tower.

Chapter 14: Queries and Quarrels

After a variety of frustrating daydreams and thorough self-reprimands, Lionel was outside his dorm room. He dug in his pocket for the single key and unlocked the door, shrugging his bag to the ground inside before turning to quietly close the door.

Next to the front door of the room was the open bathroom door with the light off inside. Lionel pushed aside the curtain hanging in the room doorway and found Greg awake for once, sitting up on his bunk bed. He nodded in Lionel's direction without taking his eyes off whatever he was reading. They rarely talked, Lionel only knew he was a graphic arts major and he worked a lot. They'd been cohabitating for just under a month, so Lionel figured they had time to talk later.

Lionel slipped his shoes off and flopped his jacket onto the back of the desk chair. "Is this yours?" Lionel asked, holding up a yellow paper. He immediately recognized anything out of place on the desk since Greg never used it.

"Oh, my mom was just in, she must have left it." Greg shrugged and continued highlighting something in the book. It was the first time Lionel had ever seen him doing work.

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"Toss it, I don't care." Greg had only given him a moment of attention.

Confident his roommate wasn't partial to the page, Lionel took a closer look. It had been folded into thirds like it might have once fit into an envelope. On the back of the page in the middle section, cursive handwriting spelled out the name of the recipient: *Vera Vidalia Monroe*.

"It's addressed to someone, are you sure I should throw it away?" Lionel met Greg's annoyed glance.

“What are you? Some kind of detective? It’s just an advertisement for some stupid place my mom was talking about. Throw it away, bro.” Greg picked up his phone instead of resuming his studies. With the book down, Lionel could read a heading underlined in highlighter that said, “Good communication skills are vital for productivity.” He tried to read more but jerked around to face the desk as Greg started to look up from his phone.

Lionel’s attention was back on the paper. He flipped it over and unfolded the top and bottom sections. He spread his hands over the page, smoothing it out. Besides the cursive addressee’s name, smudged ink caught Lionel’s eye. In one corner, different handwriting had started a list of some sort, and then further down it said “The Cantina.” He flipped the paper around and gasped when he saw what was on the other side.

“What?” Greg suddenly was interested.

“Oh. Nothing, I– I just know this place.” Lionel only stuttered a little. He had to blink his eyes and look again at the text and the paper, but he was not mistaken. How had this gotten here? Did it belong to the girl from the reserve? He tried to look for clues of where to find her. “Have you ever heard of The Cantina?” Lionel asked, bracing himself for backlash.

“Yeah. It’s a coffee shop. It just moved to a new location near my mom’s store.” Greg did not scold him for talking about a non-paper related topic.

“Your mom owns a business?” Lionel thought perhaps he had found a topic to get to know his roommate more.

“Yeah.” Greg’s response told Lionel that he was wrong. Greg was buried deep in the book again, this time he was leaning back against the wall, holding the book up. Lionel strained to read the title since some of the letters were blocked by Greg’s fingers. He finally worked out *Successful Sole Proprietorship Management* in serious bold font.

“Are you reading to help with your mom’s business?” Lionel tried again to connect, nearly gritting his teeth waiting for the answer. Instead of slamming his book and getting up to pummel his roommate for being nosy, Greg gently lowered the book and looked up with a hint of a smile.

“You really do want to be a detective, don’t you? Are you a CJ major?” Greg pressed.

“N-No. Calculus.” Lionel fidgeted with the case of his phone, staring down at it.

“You’re not even a criminal justice minor?” Greg’s voice was a soft coo.

“No, what—”

“Then you have no reason to be interrogating me, wise guy.” He snapped. Whipping the book back in front of his face, he was quickly absorbed in it again. Lionel stared at the top of Greg’s head while his confusion simmered into slight anger.

Lionel decided it was best to ignore the outburst. “Can I ask your mom about where she got this?” Greg looked slowly over the top of the book, and Lionel met his gaze with as much earnest curiosity as he could, holding up the letter.

“I told you to throw it away!” Greg snarled.

“Now I’m invested.” Lionel carefully folded the paper and slid it into his bag with the notes.

“Okay, explain this to me so I know I’m not living with an obsessive weirdo for the rest of the year.” Greg slapped the book shut.

“I’ve been going to this reserve since freshman year and the caretaker told me himself they don’t produce ads.” Lionel looked back to see Greg looking expectantly. He held the paper up with both hands to flatten it. “This is an ad for Tranquil Trails Nature Reserve that shouldn’t exist.”

Greg's brows furrowed, "You think my mom knows something?" Lionel shrugged. He had returned to the dorm to continue studying in hopes that the crushing oppressiveness of the cubicle-like dormitory would keep him from daydreaming; but the urge to investigate this mystery was too strong.

"Do you think the bus runs this late?" Lionel checked his watch.

Greg released a deep sigh, "I was going to go to the shop tonight. You can tag along if you want." One eyebrow shot up as Lionel waited for more. "Okay, you don't have to look at me like that." Lionel cocked his head. "Whatever. I'm sorry I was a jerk, just listen." Lionel's face softened, he hadn't even spoken. "You want to go talk to my mom?"

"Now?" Lionel held his wrist toward Greg. "We won't make it back before lights out."

A cheshire grin spread across Greg's face. "Even better."

Chapter 15: Truth and Tension

Greg charged unhindered past anyone and anything in their path, but Lionel could barely keep up. Even with his nose in his phone the entire walk, Greg amazed Lionel with his dexterity.

“Just a quick trip!” Lionel called over his shoulder at a confused dorm manager whom Greg had ignored. More than one drop of sweat rolled down Lionel’s forehead in the rush. Whether it was lights out or not, no one had had time to stop them.

Greg’s car was forest green and abused. One taillight receded into the mangled metal around it, a crack ran from the top of the windshield to the bottom, and a smattering of scratches and dents topped off the aesthetic.

The inside was equally well cared-for. Lionel shoved wrappers, bottles, and receipts to the side to make room for his feet. Lionel didn’t mention the trash, he was only grateful the clutter was not in their room.

MVC, the local establishment of higher learning, was near the residential area. As they traveled to the other side of town, the smooth streets felt rough with Greg’s driving style. Lionel was thankful by the time they reached the business sector.

Greg slowed the car in front of a block of connected business spaces, and it jerked to a stop. The street was empty and quiet, circles of light from the streetlamps were evenly spaced down the road.

“In here!” A sharp whisper made Lionel whip around to find the source. All he saw was dark hair disappear through a tiny open slot in the yellow door on the corner. Greg flipped a hand up, motioning Lionel to follow him up to the buildings.

“I thought we were meeting your mom?” Lionel felt the need to whisper because the street was quiet. Greg didn’t even turn around on his path up the sidewalk. He pulled open the

yellow door and peeked inside. Apparently seeing what he was looking for, Greg held the door wider for Lionel to go through, and they both let the door swing closed behind them. Inside, the room was dark except for a lamp on a desk. Lionel assumed the girl with dark hair sitting by the desk was the one who had called them inside.

“What are we doing here?” She snapped. The girl stood, her hands were clenched and she stared pins and needles at Greg. Greg tried to hug her, but she spotted Lionel over his shoulder and paused, backing away. “Who is this?”

“My roommate, he has questions about your friend.” Greg stepped aside, ushering Lionel forward.

“This is obviously not your mom,” Lionel deadpanned.

“Lionel. Clara. Clara. Lionel. Now can we get this show on the road?” Greg grimaced, baring his teeth as he waited for a response.

“You called me here after dark for this?” Clara raised one eyebrow.

“Well yes, and I wanted to see you.” He ducked his head, looking at her from under batted lashes. He took a step toward her, but she held up a hand.

“You haven’t changed anything, Greg.” Her menacing glare made Lionel feel guilty and she wasn’t even looking at him.

“Come on, baby, I need your help with something.”

“Don’t call me baby until you can call me girlfriend in front of your mom.” She turned to Lionel. “What can I help you with?”

“You know Vera Monroe?” Lionel was tired of their bickering already. At the question, Clara’s eyes widened, then she narrowed them directly at Lionel like a spotlight.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “Why?”

“I have something with her name on it, I would like to return it.” Lionel shifted his weight from one foot to the other and back again as he talked.

“Which one are you?” Clara narrowed her eyes at him, and Lionel was frantically searching through follow up questions to make sense of her initial one. “James? Ben? Victor? Or is she talking to someone new?”

“I’m Lionel,” was all he could mutter in explanation.

“How long have you been seeing her?” She pointed at him and his stomach felt like it dropped ten feet.

“He’s never met her, but my mom has.” He had little loyalty to Lionel, but at least Greg was trying to defend him.

“Your mom?” Clara glared.

“Yeah, her shop is next door.”

“Your mom owns that shop?” She demanded.

“I just work there on the weekends.”

“We’ve been meeting here for a year and you didn’t find the need to tell me that your boss is your mom?” She pulled her fist back.

“I’m sorry!” He covered his arm and flinched away from her threat. “I’m working through some stuff, okay?” For the first time since they’d started talking, Lionel felt sympathy for Greg.

“So let me see if I understand this. You called me out here for this stranger to ask me about Vera?” Clara took a step back and crossed her arms.

“To be fair, I thought we were meeting with his mom since she left the paper on our desk.” Lionel fidgeted with the strings of his jacket.

“Paper?” She looked suddenly curious.

“The front says Vera Vidalia Monroe, is that your friend?” Lionel thought back to Pat talking about the girl with an advertisement. Were there more advertisements than they knew of, or was this somehow the same girl? Lionel could still picture her fair features from their fleeting glance at the reserve. His heart began to pound.

“She did get a letter with her name on it this morning, but I never saw the inside.” Clara put a hand to her chin, staring at the ceiling for a moment. “She did say it was just an ad though. Let me see it.” Lionel looked away, but only he could feel his face turn red. The only reason they had made the trek here was the letter but in the haste to leave without being caught, he had left it on the desk.

“I don’t have it,” he admitted.

Greg slapped his own forehead. “Literally the only reason we came.”

“We are not discussing whose fault this is.” Lionel had a feeling Greg would not be the kind of person to accept his role in the operation easily.

“You’re the one that texted me like it was an emergency.” Clara turned to Greg, her arms still crossed like a mother scolding her children.

“Fine. It was an excuse to see you, it’s been five days—”

“This is the problem, Greg! I want to see you too, but I can’t keep sneaking around like this. And now I know that you’ve been lying about your mom and why you’re here.” She shook her head, looking away as her eyes began to glisten. Greg was silent, and Lionel felt the tension in the air like high humidity.

“I wasn’t lying. I just didn’t clarify,” Greg said after a moment. “But now you know.” He tried to reach for her hand.

She let him take it this time and looked at him with wide eyes. “Why do you want to wait?” Clara looked at Greg with puppy dog eyes. Greg took a deep breath, and Lionel suddenly felt like he shouldn’t be there.

“She’s already so hurt, I don’t want her to think she’s losing me.” Greg stared at the floor.

“But with your dad. . . wouldn’t she understand?” Clara stepped closer to Greg and looked up at him, still holding one of his hands. But Greg didn’t take his eyes off the floor. Lionel searched around the room for an escape.

“Maybe it is because of my dad,” Greg almost whispered. He finally looked into Clara’s eyes. “I always dreamed of introducing my Match to him.”

The casual reference caught Lionel off guard. “You guys believe in that stuff?” Lionel interjected. Greg looked back at the floor, swiping a palm quickly across his cheek.

Clara turned, “We had good examples of how the Matchmaker works.” A smile took over her face when she looked back at Greg. “What about you?”

“I don’t think anyone would Match with me.” The truth spilled out before he could stop it. The night was turning unintentionally emotional.

“Nonsense. The Matchmaker is powerful.”

“I’m not doubting His power, just my uh. . . worthiness?” He wasn’t sure how to phrase it. Before the sentiment could sink in, Lionel was startled by a sudden chime. Clara’s phone lit up with a text.

“None of us are worthy, just blessed.” Clara pulled Greg into a hug, he wrapped his long arms around her, stooping down to her height. After a moment, Greg put his hands on her shoulders and held her out at arm’s length, studying her face.

“I’m ready, meet me here tomorrow and we’ll tell my mom.”

“Then we can tell Vera?”

“Will she be here?”

“She should be here by the afternoon, but I can try to get her to come in late.” Clara reached for her phone, looking at the new message. “That’s her right now, asking me to come over.”

“So the morning though?” Greg lifted Clara’s face with a hand on her chin. She nodded. The couple hugged and said their goodbyes, but something nagged at Lionel’s mind.

“You said she would be here?” Lionel asked.

“Yeah, this is her studio. Get ready for collections, shows, and sales, this is going to be the art hub of the town.” Clara grinned.

“In the morning, can I send the ad with Greg for you to give to her?”

“Sure.” Clara paused and raised her eyebrows, “Unless you want to bring it and meet her yourself.”

Thankful for the dim lighting, Lionel felt his face on fire again as he clumsily tried to turn down the suggestion, even though he wanted nothing more than to take it.

Chapter 16: Plans and Possibilities

Greg handled the campus guards and dorm manager with an experienced professionalism that Lionel couldn't help but admire. The entire ride back had been silent as both men tried to process the emotional toll of the visit. Lionel hadn't been prepared to consider that he deserved the efforts of the Matchmaker, but maybe Clara was right.

"I'm not taking that note in the morning," Greg stated plainly as they walked down the hall to their room.

"Why didn't you say that when we were making plans?" Lionel yawned suddenly, the first sign of his drowsiness.

"Clara would yell at me, but she doesn't know what I'm planning." He tugged a lanyard from his pocket, the keys jingling.

"You're planning something so elaborate that you can't hand Clara a piece of paper?" Lionel rolled his eyes, waiting behind Greg at the door.

"I don't want the extra task on my mind. Do it yourself." He flung open the door and pulled his key out.

"Fine. Wake me up before you go." Lionel flipped the light on as he walked through the door, for once confident that no one was sleeping inside.

"That's a good idea, I could use your help with something." Greg launched into his instructions. Lionel did his best to follow, but his eyelids felt heavier with each detail Greg imparted.

By the time the sun was shining in stripes through the shades, Lionel was pleasantly unconscious. He grumbled as he was shaken awake, glancing back to see Greg hanging from the top bunk, with a deep frown. Lionel grumbled and rolled onto the floor. Soon, he was tired of the ache in his hip from the hard ground, and he stood, stretching his arms up almost to the ceiling.

The roommates had entirely opposite schedules, so they had never readied themselves in the same space. They bumped elbows at the sink, stood in the way at the dresser, and shoved past each time they needed to get through the hallway. They were both a bit irritated as they left the room together. It took the walk to the car for each of them to finish the mental pep talk about the limited expectations for personal boundaries in a shared cell.

“You don’t seem like one to forget plans.” Greg leaned forward to look past Lionel and then out his own window before pulling off campus.

“You don’t need to review, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Better not mess this up, then.” Neither of them said anything the rest of the ride. Their opportunities had aligned today, but they wouldn’t begin to giggle and gossip suddenly after several months of being estranged roommates.

It was about a ten minute drive in Greg’s car. The bus would have taken more than half an hour following the speed limit and making routine stops. Lionel gripped the seatbelt, wondering how someone could drive worse in the daylight.

When they got to the block of stores, Greg pulled onto a side street. Lionel grabbed his bag, getting out of the car without a word. He would be quick if everything went according to the plan.

On the sidewalk, he glanced to make sure everything was in his bag and flipped the brown flap closed. He looked back at Greg who nodded through the window.

Lionel's long strides had nearly reached the coffee shop when a hand latched onto his arm and wrenched him back. Greg stood behind him, eyes frantic. "Change of plans, Clara just texted that she's meeting Vera here now instead of the other coffee shop. You have to get this done *fast*. And do not let her see you!" Greg's intense stare made Lionel's heart begin to thump violently. All he could do was nod before Greg shoved him toward the coffee shop door.

Inside, people milled about between the counter and the tables. Most of the tables were empty, and Lionel glanced around to make sure he wouldn't be spotted. He approached the counter to begin with Greg's instructions.

"What— uh." Lionel looked around again, Greg's warning echoing in his mind. "I want a large— I mean, wait a second. Give me uh—" He struggled to be wary of his surroundings and also complete the order. At the cashier's puzzled look he turned all his attention to her. "Okay, sorry. I'm distracted today."

"No problem, it happens all the time." She smiled warmly.

"I need a large cappuccino and a large black drip coffee." The first step of Greg's plan was the coffee, and Lionel felt better already with the order out of his head.

"Great! I'll have those out soon. Can I get you anything else?" She sounded like she was reading from a script. "Can you give me a name for that order?"

Lionel glanced around again to make sure Clara had not arrived. Fumbling to get his phone into his bag, it slipped from his hand and slammed to the ground. The cashier cringed and several people looked over. Lionel ducked to check it. "It's fine." He was sweating.

"Um, just tell me if you want light roast or dark roast." The barista was still waiting with her marker, her professional cheer beginning to falter.

Lionel turned back to face her. “Light. I’m sorry.” He turned around again. The beating in his chest was harder than it had ever been before. Lionel felt he wasn’t cut out for the sneaking lifestyle, but the first step of the plan was going smoothly. He continued to watch people as he waited for the order.

“Cappuccino and a light roast!” The cashier called, since he hadn’t given his name. He took the cup and turned to leave, but quickly froze.

There she was. The sun behind her gave her glorious scarlet curls an ethereal glow that stopped Lionel in his tracks. He felt his face begin to turn the same color as her hair. She passed him without a glance, but his gaze followed her to the counter.

Instead of a purse, she carried a briefcase-like shoulder bag nearly identical to his own. Where the leather of his bag was cracked and faded, hers was newer but with splotches of paint in certain places. She wore patched overalls over a green and brown plaid shirt. The denim legs of her overalls also bore stripes of paint like she had a habit of cleaning her brushes on them.

As he was lost in observation, he heard the bell of the front door and jerked to look.

Lionel’s heart felt like it might beat itself out of place. An unknown man walked in. The entrance bell snapped Lionel back to his mission, and he caught the door before it closed, and slipped out onto the street.

The clothing shop Greg had described was only a few steps away, and the door was conveniently propped open. At the counter, a short, dark-haired woman looked up as the door swiped past a bell to signal a customer.

“Hello!” Her smile lit up the entire store.

“Hi! I’m Greg’s roommate, he sent me over with a little gift for you.” Lionel held the cup toward her.

“Oh! He is the sweetest! I don’t know what I would do without my boy.” She smiled fondly, looking at the cup, then glanced back up at Lionel. “So he’s on his way to the house, then?”

“Oh, yeah, definitely.” Lionel turned to face the street in case his face gave away the lie. At the edge of the window, he spotted Greg peeking to see if the coast was clear. “This store is lovely, what would you recommend for my mom or step-mom?” Part two had been accomplished. Laura jumped up, eager to explain her designs and deals, and they headed toward the back of the store. Out of the corner of his eye, Lionel watched Greg dart by unseen.

Lionel nodded and mustered polite responses about all the clothing, but his mind was no longer in the shop. Did Greg know he was supposed to be going home? How would he give Vera back this letter without seeming like a creep? After the allotted time Greg had asked for was over, Lionel wrapped up the conversation with something about coming back with money. He excused himself and left, the plan had gone off without a hitch. Any minute Laura would see the message on her coffee cup and Lionel’s task would be a success.

Back on the sidewalk, Lionel could see through the window that Vera had sat down at a table alone.

“What are you doing here?” A shrill whisper in Lionel’s ear startled him. He turned to see Clara looking at him with a deep frown. She glanced through the window at Vera and shoved Lionel down the block away from the window. “I thought Greg was going to bring the note?”

“He said he didn’t want to.” Lionel didn’t know enough to help his roommate out of trouble, so he told the truth.

“So you came all this way just to give it to her?” Clara smirked, one eyebrow raised.

“No. . . Greg has a plan.” He began to dig through his bag until he found the neatly folded yellow paper and held it up in a failed attempt to appease her. She stopped and stared into Lionel’s eyes like she could read his mind.

“What plan?” her eyes narrowed and she ignored the paper.

“I don’t know, I just had to distract his mom.” Lionel shrugged.

“Where is he now?”

“In the coffee shop.” Lionel saw nothing wrong with it, but Clara’s eyes shot wide open and she bent to look back at the coffee shop and gasped. Lionel whipped around, expecting to see Greg doing something ridiculous. Instead, he was face to face with a stranger, blatantly brandishing something she owned.

Chapter 17: Treats and Threats

There was nowhere to hide his blush, but as he looked into Vera's sapphire-clear eyes, he didn't feel nervous. Standing face to face, Lionel noticed that she was the same height as him.

"Why do you have this?" She plucked the page from his hand and turned to Clara. "Who is this?" Vera looked like she had been betrayed, and Lionel started to understand why Clara had been afraid of her spotting them.

"He's . . . a friend," Clara did not look at Vera.

"You better not be dating him behind my back!"

"Definitely not," Lionel interjected. Both girls waved him into silence.

"It isn't him, but I have something to tell you." Clara grimaced.

Just then, the tinkle of the coffee shop bell made all of them turn to the door. Greg cautiously approached the hostile meeting. "Give me the box," he said to Lionel.

The last part of the plan had been to bring in the box he had been carrying in his bag. Greg had insisted that he carry it since he already had a bag. He dug around for a moment, then presented the box on an open hand like a platter.

After a moment, Vera grabbed for the box, but Lionel jerked it away before her hands could slip around it. He held it above his head. "This is not mine to give!" He placed it in Greg's hands gingerly.

"Come with me," Greg said, reaching for Clara's hand.

"What is going on?" Vera looked from Clara to Greg and back.

"I'll explain in a minute." Clara took his hand and he led her down the sidewalk toward his car with the box in hand.

Lionel watched them walk, contemplating what Greg's new plan was. Once they had disappeared around the corner, he glanced at Vera, and suddenly each beat of his heart felt like slow and steady percussion. Starstruck, he tried to look away, but his head wouldn't listen. She was looking down the road where her friend had disappeared, and even in profile, Lionel was dumbfounded. She reminded him of a sculpture: smooth porcelain crafted to perfection. Two slender fingers were twisted in her hair, and pale freckles looked like paint splatter up her arms.

He instinctively flicked his eyes down as she began to look over. He swiped a hand through his hair, trying to look casual. Her eyes felt like a match drawing near to his skin; his cheeks burned. Why did this stranger make him feel like underwear hung out to dry?

Lionel was suddenly aware of the subtle chatter and noise around him. He didn't know how long he had been zoned out. Then, he found his eyes locked on hers. Rather than the usual urge to tear his eyes away, he was glued. "I found it in my room, I'm not a creep."

"Sure," Vera said, looking down at the letter.

"My roommate's mom owns that clothing store." He tried a different topic.

"Your roommate who just disappeared with my best friend?" Vera crossed her arms.

"Yes."

"What's his name then?"

"Greg."

"Okay, I believe you." Vera nodded, her tense posture loosening.

Suddenly, a deep, strong voice echoed around the street. Greg's urgent tone made Vera look back frantically. Her eyes searched Lionel's for an explanation that he couldn't give her. He didn't know Greg well enough to understand the tone.

When Clara raised her voice in response, Vera began walking down the sidewalk. Unsure of the situation, but confident that Vera knew more than he did, Lionel followed.

Before they reached the corner a car raced straight past the stop sign, plowing through the intersection. At the same time, Lionel heard more than one scream and the unsettling yet unmistakable sound of bodies hitting the ground. Whipping his head back to the end of the block, Lionel started to sprint. At the end of the street, Greg and Clara both lay motionless on the ground.

Chapter 18: Secrets and Surprises

Greg stirred first, rolling to his side and getting to feet. Clara was on the ground, but she was breathing heavily and looking around quickly.

“What just happened?” Vera screeched, running to grab Clara’s hand as Greg reached for the other. Clara looked from one to the other, then took Greg’s hand. He easily lifted her to her feet.

“Are you okay?” Greg was frantically wiggling Clara’s fingers and wrists and examining her ankles while she assured him she was okay. Finally sure she was okay, he pulled her into an embrace.

“Gregory?” At the call, Greg jumped away from Clara. A woman with short dark hair popped her head out of the coffee shop. “That *is* you!” She let the door close behind her as she stomped toward them. “You’re supposed to be at the house with your brothers!”

Now that Clara was free and standing, Vera was clinging to her arm, and Lionel heard her murmur, “Clara? Who are these people?” Lionel couldn’t pull himself from the distress in her voice and eyes. He had little to do with the situation at hand, but if he left now, what would she think of him?

“We almost got hit by a car,” Greg offered. “There was a car coming! You all saw that car speed by!” He looked at each of them in turn.

“I did see a car, now that you mention it.” Lionel provided the confirmation Greg had been looking for.

“You pushed me out of the way of a car?” Clara reached for Greg’s hand, but he pulled away. He cringed as if he were in pain, and his face began to glow red. He stared at his feet for too long. Finally, he looked up at his mom. “I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t putting all my effort into school when I wasn’t in the shop.”

Vera threw up her hands in frustration. Lionel noticed the crease in her forehead, her lips downturned slightly, her fists closing tighter and tighter. “Keep going.” Lionel prodded Greg for more. Greg looked over at Clara and Vera. When he met Clara’s eyes, a look of resolve took over his features.

“We’ve been dating for a few months now.” With Greg’s confession, Vera exploded like a bomb. She lashed out at Clara with both her words and fists. Lionel couldn’t hear most of her tirade over Clara’s desperate explanations.

“How could you—” Vera’s squeal rang out.

“You don’t understand, please—” Clara begged. “He’s the only guy I’ve ever liked. I didn’t want you to feel like I had it easy.”

Vera paused. “I’m glad you told me,” she said quietly. Clara threw her arms around Vera’s neck.

“I thought you’d never forgive me.” Her words were muffled in Vera’s shoulder.

“I would never be able to stay mad at you.” Vera smiled, pulling away from the hug. She looked at Greg, who had been explaining the morning’s events to his mom. “I always knew your belief in the Matchmaker would pay off,” she told Clara with a wink.

With that statement, Clara turned to Greg. The way he looked at her made Lionel’s heart flutter, and for once, he had hope that he could one day look at someone that way too.

“Looks like I have someone to get to know!” Laura was silently bawling, and Vera reached to give her a hug too. Feeling out of place, Lionel was acutely aware of how little connection he had with the situation at hand. Lionel shifted back and forth on his feet, wringing his hands.

Laura released Vera, explaining, “I tried to match you with Greg because you’re both artists, but the true Matchmaker clearly knows better.” Laura winked. “Let’s celebrate!” She lifted her coffee in the air, “Drinks are on me!” She motioned them into the coffee shop, wrapping up the unusual meeting.

Chapter 19: Promised and Provided

Inside, the shop had grown busy. Only two tables were available, so Greg pulled up a chair and sat next to Clara. The lovebirds hadn't released each others' hands since they had stopped hugging on the street.

Lionel and Vera sat at the second table, across from each other. Both of them sat sideways to face toward the other table. Lionel felt like his stomach was doing gymnastics any time he looked across the table.

A lady with sandy brown hair and a kind face approached the tables. "Can I take your orders?"

"Amy!" Laura exclaimed, and Lionel suddenly recognized that lady that had come to the door when Laura first spotted them. "Have you met Vera? She's our new block buddy!"

"We haven't met, but I stopped by her place yesterday. Did you get that note your mom had me write?" Amy paused and covered her mouth, and Vera snapped to look at her, narrowing her eyes.

"A note with my full name on it?" Vera stood and searched her pockets for the note. "I hate that stupid name," she muttered as she searched.

"Yes, this lady came to me, told me to write something for her daughter, and not to tell her where it came from. I swear, that's all I know." She held up both hands in innocence.

"There wasn't anything but my name written on that. Then the advertisement printed inside." She clawed through her bag, tugging it in each direction. "Where did it go?" Vera released an exasperated sigh.

"Advertisement? It was a short invitation to the coffee shop, but I wouldn't call it an advertisement." Amy shrugged.

“Aha!” Vera pulled out the letter and unfolded it to show the group. Lionel leaned across the table, eager for an explanation. Vera pulled the folded flaps away from the center, but her face darkened as she looked inside. No one said anything for a moment, and Vera’s eyebrows creased deeper as she studied the page.

She glanced up at Lionel, but he was just as bewildered. Now, the entire page was yellowish with perfectly curling cursive on the inside as well as the outside. Amy’s face lit up with recognition.

“Yeah, that’s it! I think she wanted to make sure you had connections without being too overbearing,” Amy tried to explain.

Vera looked beautiful even with her brows lowered and her mouth bent into a frown. Lionel shook his head, trying to push the thoughts away. Surely the Matchmaker had someone more average waiting for him. A girl like that would never give him a second look, he told himself.

Lionel knew he should excuse himself, get on the bus, go back to campus, and never look back; his mission had been completed. He could slip out while the rest of the group ordered coffee.

But looking up at the beauty in front of him, he couldn’t bring himself to stand. He racked his brain for something to say, startled when she suddenly turned and smacked both hands on the table.

“You definitely saw the ad for that reserve, right?” Vera looked back and forth between his eyes.

“I did! And Pat said that he didn’t know of any ads they put out.”

“Is that the janitor guy?” Vera’s eyes were wide and excited.

“Yes. He’s the only employee there, so he would know.” Lionel was looking easily into her eyes.

“I guess I don’t need the answer.” Quietly, she looked down at the page in her hand, folded it, and tucked it into her pocket. “You’re in college?”

“Yeah, my last year. If I don’t fail this one class.” He had surprised himself, but he didn’t feel like he needed to hide his faults from her. She smiled, and he was reassured.

“What class?”

“History of Art.”

“Do you hate art?”

“No, I just can’t keep focus.”

“Do you need help? I need something to do while I paint.” She blurted, then looked away for the first time.

“Oh, I don’t want to intrude.” He tried to give her an out in case she hadn’t meant it.

“No, you’d be helping me.” Vera looked back up, and they locked eyes.