Finding Daphne

Sam Thayn

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol27/iss2/3

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inscape by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
I have this recurring dream. Have you ever had a recurring dream? They aren't common. Well they are common—they're recurring—but I mean the phenomenon isn't common. I asked ten people if they had recurring dreams, and they most certainly did not. But I have one about a girl named Daphne.

Most guys can tell you what she looks like—the girl they're going to marry. But I can tell you what her name is. In my dreams she is raven-haired and blue-eyed and her name is Daphne. She has beautiful cream skin and we are always talking while it's raining outside. It's the earliest dream I can remember. I remember dad coming home from the bakery in white clothes, I remember my big wheel, I remember watching mom cook,
and I remember Daphne. And it’s always been that way.

Sometimes I pretend I have a therapist. She wears a black turtleneck and sips quietly on something warm while I jitter in a corner. A picture of counseling calm, and maybe that would be enough. Sometimes I pretend she tells me things (maybe this is cause enough to get one). But I think my therapist would tell me that telling strangers is healthy. Maybe it is. I don’t know you, you don’t know me, but we’re talking about important things. And maybe you are wearing a turtleneck, sipping something warm. I don’t know.

See? I feel better already.
The smell of books in the morning is not the same smell as books in the night. I know because I work at a certain bookstore in Provo. The best way I can describe the difference to you is this: in the morning, that deep, illustrious scent has the sun in it. It’s a warm, bright smell. Especially the bookshelves facing the windows. In fact, at the right times of day, a yellow slice of morning browns the paperbacks on the back wall. That, my friends, smells good. If things are slow, and most mornings they are, it’s a perfect time to read poetry. Poetry was meant to be read in sunlight.

At night, when traffic is heavy and headlights are glowing behind the front windows, the books kind of close shut and tighten away as the temperature cools. Don’t tell anyone, but they’re that much harder to open and the smell is locked deep away. At night you can hardly smell the books without getting right inside one. This is what Dickens is for. And Dostoevsky. And Joyce. The night.

I’m determined to surround myself with words at all times. I don’t mind people, I hate numbers, but I love words.

I hope they bury me in a library.

I can tell you the names and name tags in a
place the way some guys can tell you who is wearing a ring. I’d like to think my motives are purer, higher, better than the rock-counting desperation I’m all too familiar with here. I love a good name tag. I’m looking for her name, of course, but once that’s out of the way (and I haven’t seen it yet), it’s fine for striking up conversation. I think I’ve always preferred Wingers over Red Robin because the latter doesn’t have name tags. There’s something so comforting about that first awkward social step becoming a bright, shiny, readable sign for all to see.

It would be far too easy to have her wearing a name tag the first time we meet. And maybe even a little anti-climactic. Every nameless woman is a breathtaking opportunity and future, sashaying past with so many glances. She could be the mother of my children, the keeper of my secrets. She could be my knight in shining armor. She could be a bitter argument, a long talk under the stars, plane tickets to Paris, a wrinkled grandmother, a weary housewife, a poet reading Dickinson in the morning with bare feet baking in dappled sunlight. She could be anything, but today, the girl in the café, she was nothing—no, the girl I saw today curved between the magazine racks and disappeared into the blue-skied outside.
I’ll never know about that one. And some days, that’s ok.

Veronica came in today.

Here is a girl I cannot figure out, and therefore she intrigues me. She wears both pointed glittery shoes and plain white flip-flops with reckless abandon. Some days her collar is flipped up and her hair straight and long and firm. Other days the collar is down, the strands are pulled back, and she clicks by on stiletto heels with a hundred eyes following. She’s a real doll, let me tell you.

She comes in on Thursdays and talks to Brett, the muscled, bleach-blond store manager. Go figure. They’re like two movie stars drifting in a crowd of nobodies until they reach each other. It’s not unusual in this city. I would write her off as a product of the ritzy apartments uptown but for the way she looks sometimes, when her hair is down and her toenails don’t have bright paint. She looks so girl-next-door in those moments; I forgive her for the proud and indignant smirk she clicks around with on the other days.

Did I mention her name’s Veronica? It’s like I’m reading Archie all over again.

I think I learned about icebergs in high school psychology. Something about the id and the
superego, submerged deep into the subconscious like an iceberg underwater. They say that 80 percent of an iceberg is underwater, obscured from view, impossible to see even up close because of the blue-white reflective light.

I think love is like that. And I can only see myself on top, scratching at it with a fork.

It’s all well and good, in the comfort of youth, to imagine love as that fleeting, sweeping, magical moment. Off your feet, on a cloud, in the air. But something happens as we approach the Volga boat ride to Marriedland. Love becomes serious. Deadly serious. Love seemed so harmless when it was a series of crushes and dreams of kissing tag. Today, as a single male navigating the waters of the Provost, it’s a deadly game fraught with truth, lies, and error. Call me dramatic. But watching, as I obsessively do, the passings and goings of boys and girls and men and women with their false smiles and careful text messages, I can’t help it.

This love thing is tough. Sometimes, when I’m shelving the self-help section, some poor soul with his mouth drawn tight comes in like he’s on a mission. It’s always a guy, and it’s always at night. He’s looking for something, and I can tell from down the aisle he’s looking at books on
relationships. Everyone from Dr. Phil to Bill Cosby has written something about it, and more often than not, the lost walk out of the store with a few books tucked away. I'd like to tell them to just leaf through and find a section that’s relevant to them today. Because tomorrow it’s something else entirely.

All this in an attempt to break that iceberg down into something manageable. I would know, I’ve probably read them all. There’s a lot of downtime in a bookstore.

Fact: Every good superhero has a fortress of solitude.

Just ask Superman. He’s had one in steep mountains, in the sun, in the Antarctic, and now hidden in the Cordillera Del Condor mountain range in South America. He made it famous. With a key so heavy only he could lift it, he locked away his favorite villains, artifacts, and weapons behind an impossible door:

When I lived back East, that fortress was a gathering of quaking aspens shivering over a small pond that I swear had never seen man before me. I found it on a drive, the kind that takes you past your familiar boundaries, urging you to leave, as much as you can’t or don’t want to. I drove until I
found someplace quiet, left my car, and laid down in flat, wet, windblown leaves like a weirdo. Thing is, I was by myself, and I didn’t feel weird. I felt alone, but not even the lonely kind. The clouds blocking the sun hid me from nature herself and I took a half hour remembering every sense so I could bring it back later. The fortress of solitude.

It’s harder here in Provo. The myriad parks are always thick with draping couples and smiling families—no place for a shunned superhero. These are grounds for buried and brighter tomorrows, far past the hanging guilt I feel today. The lookouts are surrounded by quiet tanks of cars with shadows in the back, dark wisps of almost-love. Sometimes I think Provo is kryptonite. Find the quietest, loneliest corner of town, and I will find you a blonde and her on-again-off-again boyfriend, about to be engaged for the third time.

It’s no place for a superhero, I tell you.

My aunt had every Garfield book that ever was, and as a babysat kid, I read every one. A lot. And somehow Garfield’s hatred for Monday turned into a real-life adult disdain. The only good thing about today was the rain, popping...
off the roof at work and blue-graying the people coming inside.

K was married last weekend, and though I didn’t receive a wedding invitation, I did receive a text message. This is what it said:

Thinking of you. I hope you’re happy.

Like all text messages, it stared back at me and demanded response. And what? She had been mine once; I held back her hair when she threw up, just like in the movies. I was the favorite of her little sister, the recipient of Mom-made cookies, and the Only Boy Who Dad Ever Liked. It had seemed so right.

If I didn’t know she was kissing in white Saturday morning, I’d almost say she wants to see me again. Thinking of you. I would hope I wasn’t thinking of her on my honeymoon. But after what we had, or at least what I thought we had, maybe I would be. But the I hope you’re happy. Text messages are always teetering between tragedy and disaster. They’re always in context, so it probably just means what it says. But what if it means,

I’m married now. I hope you’re happy.

Or what if it means,

I’m thinking of you on my honeymoon for crying out loud! I hope you’re happy.
Well K, wherever Niagara Falls finds you, I hope you’re happy too. There’s an incessant rain outside and some small part of me hopes it’s raining on you. You never liked the rain like I did.

I think I’ll just keep that text to myself, though.

K had these pink lips that just—well, you would be talking to her, and you’d want to kiss her. You’d just watch her mouth.

“You like the rain?” She was incredulous.

“I like the rain.”

There were gray clouds knotting overhead as we settled the picnic blanket down and opened the mustard. We watched them hulk above us, her eyes behind glittery gold oversized beach sunglasses and a lopsided scowl, me with a satisfied comfort. Sometimes I thought the sun and I were enemies. I always felt better when he couldn’t see me. I still do. It isn’t rational, and it makes me a killjoy for all those fun things people like to do in the summer—boating, tanning, biking, hiking, running. I never could explain this to her.

“I’m sorry. I think the sun and I are at war.”

“You what?” Incredulous.

These details, I think lost on the general male population, make all the difference. Sometimes I’m asked what makes my perfect woman. And that is a question you just can’t answer. It’s the only mysterious thing a man has, the answer to that question. Revealing it can end the dance before it’s begun.

Tonight she was a brunette in pale yellow flip-flops. A small, brown woven number for the purse, and little jewelry. In fact, what there was impressed: a single matching yellow bracelet. Blue jeans and white top, crouched at the middle shelf.

“Can I help you?”
She didn’t even look up. “Just looking, thanks.”
“You’re looking pretty hard.”
Laugh. “Well, I’m looking for Tolstoy.”
"You’ve found him.” I pointed a shelf over, same row.

Tolstoy. We talked about Tolstoy for almost fifteen minutes. It doesn’t get better than that.

So we’re going out Saturday. Her name isn’t Daphne. It’s Susan. And it’s not the recurring dream. But if you are what you read, I could read a girl that reads Tolstoy.