



1997

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Recommended Citation

Halverson, Krista (1997) "Street Story," *Inscape*: Vol. 17 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol17/iss1/8>

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Street Story

Krista Halverson

HE STARTS FOLLOWING ME at five o'clock Wednesday afternoon. I turn a corner; he follows. I slip into a grocery store. He gets a cart and starts putting things into it. I walk to the produce section. He needs some carrots. When I tiptoe by the candy, he gets a Hershey's bar.

He turns back onto the street soon after I leave the store. He has a newspaper and I have a rock in my sneakers. I sit on a bench next to an old man with nose hair and a bus schedule. I wait for the man with the newspaper to walk past, but he doesn't. A sneak look behind and I see him talking to a woman. Maybe asking for directions. Maybe just pretending. I stand up and yawn loudly. I turn away. He is following me again.

Into the post office. He produces a letter from the front pocket of his purple jogging suit and gets in line. I stand by the stamp machine and wait for him to put his credit card away. I have half a pack of M&Ms in my pocket. I eat a few, then drop a couple—both green. What is it teenagers say about green M&Ms? I try not to worry too much. Maybe he doesn't know about green.

At the park I stop to stretch my calves, leaning on a picnic table. There is a couple arguing over a dog on a tight leash. I would go and solve their problem if I didn't have one of my own. He is standing behind a blue Nissan, transferring information from the "for sale" sign into a little black book. I am bold and I stare back at him. He doesn't look up. We go

another block or two. He is a good citizen; he picks up trash. I pick up trash too because we all have a responsibility to pick up trash and to vote. I think he is a Libertarian.

It's getting dim and the kids are running into houses up and down the street. Two point five children per home. This is one of the better neighborhoods with a city address. There are block home signs in every other window.

Suddenly he turns onto a side street. I have to walk back three houses to catch up with him. I tread loudly, walking through a puddle by the sidewalk and squishing my tennis shoes right behind him. Closer, and I am almost at his heels—faster, now if he stops we will collide and fall down together in the middle of the street.

A teenager breezes past us on his bicycle and the street is quiet. I am close enough to feel the disturbed air flurry around my cheek and lay a long strand of brown hair across my face. I lift my hand to brush it away and he is watching my shadow move ahead of us on the street.

"I'm going to stop now," he says.

"Fine," I say, pulling the rest of my hair from its ponytail and holding the elastic in my teeth as I braid it around front.

But he doesn't stop and I move to the side, pretending to ignore him, and watch the streetlights buzz on and off, warming up for the night.

"Shouldn't you get home?" he asks. "Feed your cat or something?"

I look at him; he is about two years younger than me, maybe twenty-six. A skinny guy who probably laughs like a skinny guy. I want to know how he laughs so I stick around. He wants me to leave so he can go back to his stalker hang-out and drink black coffee and aspire to anarchy. He is an atheist with a heart of gold who tries to be tough but can't even follow a girl home.

"That really bothers you, doesn't it?" I say, but I don't explain what and he doesn't ask.

I start noticing other things about this stranger trying to out-walk me in the dark. His hair is pale and his skin looks thin and drawn tight across his face, like a hungry bird or paper held up to a window. His eyes may be light; the whites bulge slightly and reflect the overhead streetlights. He turns his head at an angle away from me. He is getting annoyed. For a moment I am afraid.

We haven't walked much further when he leans too far on his shoe and his leg jerks swiftly downward. In an instant he has regained his balance but his patience is gone.

"What," he says, almost without opening his mouth, "do you want?" His paper face is turning red and dark. I doubt now that I

will hear him laugh. Does he ever laugh at all? It is hard to imagine he will ever recover from this mood. This pleases me in a peculiar way.

I let him get ahead. I'm in no hurry and I have a feeling. I start to whistle.

His shoulders rise a little at this and his stiff pace quickens. There is a sound up ahead from the bushes, and his head flicks in its direction. There is no one there but it makes me wonder where we are going and whose door he will use to shut me out. I hope it will belong to a beautiful woman. His age, but stronger than him, and demanding. I hope she will lean from the door as he whispers in her ear, and strain to see me as I recede into the dark.