

DEAN SERRAVALLE

While Jane Writes

NICK STOOD AT THE DRUGSTORE counter while Lia floated from side to side against the backdrop of reusable Kodak cameras and metallic batteries. Her voice amplified his breathing.

"Is that everything tonight?"

"No," he wanted to say.

Instead, he pushed the *get well soon* card towards her. While she studied it for the price, he examined the whiteness of her coconut skin. Her golden hair was tied back so neatly tonight. He would want her to know if she asked. That he didn't need the tension band he bought last week, or the flexible toothbrush, or the tiny travel deodorants. That he had little to say in the flickering death of fluorescent lights.

"Do you have air miles?"

"No."

"That will be two fifty."

He paid and left the same way he came. With the afterthought that someone could hurt her this late at night.



Jane was visible next door through her bedroom window. Their houses were so close that they nearly touched at the eaves trough. Nick could see her from his attic loft, through his fire escape window. Writing, as she often did, when Joey wasn't around. It was a hobby that annoyed Joey to the point of fierce jealousy.

"Who are you writing to," he would often demand, like the night before. His mistimed Serbian accent made him sound primeval.

"No one you would know," she teased and continued.

"I'll kill him if I find out who he is?"

“Joey can’t read. Joey can’t read,” her kids made a game of it, like their mother. And he chased them around the bedroom, unlike their father. Until he caught one, the young boy, and took him hostage in the air.

“If you don’t tell me who you’re writing to, I’ll burn the boy’s fingers off.” He leaned the cigarette in his mouth closer to the boy’s hand.

The boy cried, understanding the threat, smelling the smoky clothes, feeling the new boyfriend’s grip around his neck.

“It’s only a letter.”

“To who?”

“To myself.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because it’s called a diary. It’s personal.”

Joey dropped the boy and before he could give him time to escape to another, safer room, he made sure his girlfriend’s son heard how his new parents resolved things.

“I’m going to fuck you now.”

The boy tried to find his sister but she was already outside, playing with an invisible friend.

“Watch what you say in front of the kids.”

“They’re not mine. What do I care?”

“I’m busy.”

“No you’re not.”

He tore the sheets from her journal like he tore her clothes, and she stabbed him with the pen. But he laughed like a magician disguising a trick, before turning her around. Nick watched and listened from his fire escape window as she said nothing, screamed nothing, moaned nothing until Joey the Serbian pulled her hair and slapped her face. She refused to cry, or to sigh, as if to spite what he wanted to hear—resistance. The young boy found his sister outside, below the window, and he repeated Joey’s threat over and over again because he was six years old.



Nick sat in his kitchen and perused a definition he had downloaded from the Internet. It was different from the one he had found in one of the old library books covering the table. It stated that the *flaw in the tragic hero that causes his or her downfall is an integral and even defining part of the protagonist’s character. For example, Oedipus’ thirst for knowledge and Antigone’s devotion to duty were hardly flaws but qualities at the heart of their character.* Nick scratched out his previous thesis statement, as well as a list of fraudulent titles—“Lives of the tragic hero,” “Evolution of a tragic persona,” “A

tragic mind is a terrible thing to waste.” He threw the crumpled paper ball in the direction of the overflowing garbage and stared at it until it became an eyesore.

When he left to dispose of the garbage outside, he saw Joey the Serbian smoking on the front porch. Joey had moved an old sofa there. During the day it made the yellow-sided house look grungy. But at night, it looked comfortable.

“Hold on there, Nikoli,” he spoke up even though Nick tried to ignore him.

Nick placed the black garbage bag in the green bin.

“If you wait a minute you’ll see her.”

“Who?”

“The hooker in the cab.”

“Is she working tonight?”

“She works every night.”

“Why does she work in the cab?”

Nick knew the answer to the question. But for some reason, he wanted to hear Joey’s interpretation.

“Because she feels safe inside.”

“But she has a house.”

“Lots can happen in a house.”

“What about the fare?”

“They pay it. They don’t care. They probably like it in there.”

“But where does he drive them.”

“By the river.”

“Does he stop?”

“I don’t think so, here she comes.”

Joey flicked his cigarette. He seemed too interested in the process.

The hooker stepped out of the cab and waited by the road in front of her house. She was long-legged tall, almost uncoordinated in her stiletto boots. She lit a cigarette and glanced over to the both of them staring. She looked as if she was going to say something about her privacy, on her property, when she realized she was waiting on the curb. Before she could finish the cigarette another cab picked her up. There was a man waiting in the backseat. The cab light flashed on, occupied, and it purred away.

“What a life,” Joey whispered before lighting another cigarette himself.

“Good night, man,” Nick hinted but Joey stopped him.

“Hey, Nikoli.” Nick hated this nickname.

“Yeah.”

“You teach at the university?”

"A few classes."

"So you're a teacher."

"I'm a student. I'm doing my Masters."

"So you're a Master, whoa. A Master in what?"

"English."

"So why do you live in that shithole?"

"I've got to pay for school."

"But don't they pay you?"

Nick was already growing tired of this conversation.

"Yes, but it's less than my tuition, than the money I have to pay to go to school."

"You're getting shafted, buddy, I hope you know that."

A light on the second floor glowed yellow from above. Jane was awake.

"Listen, you like to burn?"

"Burn?"

"Yeah, grass. I'll give you a bag of weed every week if you teach me."

"Teach you what?"

"To do what you do." He didn't want her to hear. Nick nodded.

"When?"

"I'm on shift work. I'll let you know."

"Listen, Joey. I'm pretty busy with my studies, and—"

"You sell it and I'll give you a cut. It'll help pay for your school. Deal?"

"Let me think about it."

"I'll come over when your light is on."

Nick had nothing more to say so he nodded and left.



Thursday's excuse was a lottery ticket. The opportunity to say things like "it's a big jackpot this week," or something cornier like, "what would you do with the money if you won it." It would make her smile; however fake, as she would feed his ticket into the blue and red machine with computerized musical tones. The only downfall would be the presence of others in a line behind him. Old people with ten tickets filled out, sometimes speaking so loudly to one another that she felt it rude if she talked to him alone. Tonight, there were two old people in line with a handful of tickets before him. This was good. He could stare at her directly with the excuse that he had to wait his turn.

When she disappeared behind the register, Nick pretended to be interested in the rotating cage shelving cheap paperback novels. He spun it around a few times. This could be an inexpensive purchase for another night. One that could spark more conversation. Perhaps, she hid one of these books underneath that counter. She might have taken the time to sneak in a chapter when the drugstore was empty, or when the pharmacist took lunch. Selecting the right one would be like picking numbers in the lottery.

“Lottery ticket?”

“Yes.”

“Is that everything tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then, I’ll ring it in.”

The tingling sound of the old people exiting through the glass door startled him. The drug mart was empty but for coloured inventory. The pharmacist was busy in the back with a clipboard.

“There you go, good luck.”

“Thank you,” Nick took his time burying the tickets in his front pocket.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

He wanted to go back inside. But she disappeared beneath the counter.



Nick found Joey sitting on his fire escape, spying on Jane. He was perched at the edge, his legs dangling between the railings, kicking the air. To the right of him was a bag within another translucent bag. By the scent of the air around him, Nick realized that Joey had already smoked a few joints.

“Joey, I’ve got some work to do.”

“Sometimes she writes all night.”

In the window frame, Jane sat on her bed cross-legged.

“What do you think she’s writing, Nicoli? You must see her?”

“I don’t know, Joey.”

Nick felt the stuffed lottery tickets in his jean pockets. He took a seat next to Joey and leaned against the railing inadvertently thinking of Lia at the drug mart. Where did she go after work? What was her world like, and was she someone different out of uniform.

“Roll yourself one, buddy,” Joey insisted, nudging the bag over.

"I don't know how," Nick admitted although he had seen it done before. He wasn't in the mood for such specific concentration.

"You have scissors?"

"Yeah."

"Get them, and I'll show you how to make more money with the weed."

Nicked stepped inside the loft to retrieve the scissors. His dissertation beckoned him for attention. His books were open and expectant as well, with library fines he couldn't afford, pending. He had left the paper with a new direction before escaping to the drug store. An open thesis thought. That tragic heroes invite tragedy subconsciously because they crave feeling sorry for themselves. He could argue that point strongly with Shakespearean cases like Hamlet, King Lear, and Othello, not to mention Oedipus and more modern cases like Arthur Miller's Willy Loman. They all had people surrounding them who were capable of showing them pity.

But more important things demanded his attention, like Joey. Nick grabbed a few beers from the fridge out of respect for the visitation. Joey puffed back a crooked thick joint.

"Here, let me see them."

He grabbed the scissors, opened both bags but left the clear one inside, and refined the marijuana.

"You see, you cut it up nice and fine and then you roll them yourself, nice and tight. This generation is too lazy to roll, so you can sell them the joints instead of the grass and charge more."

Joey was mechanical in this enterprise. And as he snipped, and licked rolling papers, Nick switched his attention to Jane's incessant writing. She was dressed in a nightgown with a string loosely dangling in the front. When she increased her pace to one more feverish, Nick noticed the slope of her hooking breasts. She was thin and blonde but worn on the face. She must have been a stunner once.

"So you figured it out yet," Joey remarked, not looking up.

"What?"

"What she's writing."

"It's hard to tell from up here."

The sound of a car on the street decelerated and a door slammed shut. The cab hooker was also awake. Midnight shift.

"Probably just thoughts."

"Thoughts?"

"Yeah, what she's thinking."

"Is that good or bad?"

"I would argue good."

"Why?" Joey stopped the production line.

"This way she doesn't hold it in."

"Hold what in?"

"What she's feeling?"

"About who?"

"I don't know, but from the looks of it, she must be feeling a lot."

"You think she writes about me?" Joey asked.

"Again, I can't read her pen."

"Here," Joey offered the last and biggest joint to Nick.

He took it, spent some time trying to light it and then coughed. When he did so, Jane stopped writing to notice them on the fire escape. She appeared worried and then disgusted before she returned to her thoughts on paper. *Appropriateness. In his definition of the tragic hero, Aristotle states that the man must be domineering or "manly," but for a woman to appear formidable would be inappropriate.*



This could be a new angle, Nick thought the next morning, as he opened the fire escape window to air out the loft. Jane was up early, writing more than he was. Her children were in the backyard. This time they were exploring the hardness of unripe apricots, which they picked, examined, and then eventually threw at passing cars.

That day, Nick brought a collection of marijuana cigarettes to school, just as Joey recommended. Some, Joey claimed, might prefer a rocket to a tightly rolled one, while most would pay double for double the size. Worried about approaching those in his program, they made their way to him instead. Afterwards Nick realized that his scented jacket was the selling point, even to the professor who was mentoring his dissertation project. He got one for free.



At the drug mart, Lia waited for an older lady to retrieve pennies from her purse. Because the lady was hunched over at the counter, Nick met Lia's eyes directly. She smirked at him, impatient. Nick held an assortment of oil fresheners in his hand. Vanilla scented, orange scented, blackberry. What did blackberry smell like, he thought, as he nearly dropped one. The pennies chimed on the glass counter covering the scratch-and-win lottery tickets.

"One, two, three," she counted.

The bell indicating someone entering the drug mart sounded. Nick was too focused to look back. There was definite eye contact this time. Lia swiped the change in her long fingers and fisted them before dropping them into the open register.

"Have a nice day." She smiled in Nick's direction, expectant.

"You too, honey," the old lady sidestepped away to zip up her purse.

"These plugs are much better," Lia recommended. She turned around and reached high to the top shelf behind her. Her stretched frock revealed her lime green underwear and a vined rose tattoo blossoming upwards on her back, where he couldn't see the rest of the image. He never imagined her having a tattoo.

"Nicoli!"

It was a voice he didn't want to hear behind him.

"Joey, what are you doing here?"

"I came to get some papers, you too?"

"No, I mean."

"That's a good idea, air fresheners. Your clothes smell like some serious weed. You burn again last night?"

Nick glanced to Lia in absolute horror. She had already retrieved the papers Joey had asked for.

"Thanks, baby," Joey butted in with the exact change.

"You don't mind buddy, I got to get back to work. I'll be over tonight."

"Hold on, Joey."

Nick unloaded the air fresheners on the counter and took him aside.

"I don't think I have time tonight."

He then felt a hand on his back. It was soft, and child like. He turned around and it was Lia, who was shorter on this side of the counter. From the waist down she was heavier, her legs thick and muscular. She was wearing high cut running shoes with the tongues hanging out.

"You guys burning tonight?" she asked Joey. She spoke to him as if she knew him well, better than Nick. Her demeanour had also changed. It was a little rough on the edges, and not so refined and well mannered as it was behind the counter.

"Yeah, you want to come? We're at Nick's place."

"Sure. Where's Nick's place?"

"Right next to mine."

"By the cab hooker," she started to laugh.

"Across the street." Joey nonchalantly hinted with his hand that someone was waiting for him.

"Nick will give you directions, if you forget. I got to go."

An awkward silence. Nick wished someone would enter the drug mart. But no one did.

"Well, are you finally going to ask me out?"



At the loft, Lia was interested in the books on the kitchen table.

"Have you read all of these books?"

"Not all of them. I'm still doing research."

"Boy, are they old. Why are you reading old books?"

Nick found this question fascinating in its paradoxical innocence.

Why was he studying something already written upon so many times over? Was he a follower? Is that why she needed to invite herself over?

"I'm not sure. They interest me, I suppose."

"What's so interesting about old books, I'd really like to know."

She smelled wonderful tonight, like a moving blackberry air freshener in his grungy little loft. And her hair was not tied back but straightened out and long, embracing her shoulders. She was wearing tight jeans and a white studded belt.

"Want to burn some first?"

"Why won't you answer my question? Are you afraid I won't understand? Do you think I can't read either?"

"No, not at all. I apologize. You see, I'm pretty ashamed of it all. It's called a dissertation, I mean an ongoing study, and I haven't written much but it's on the tragic hero."

"Hopefully not Aristotle's version. His is sexist. That whole idea that any "class of person" may be portrayed as "good," a necessary ingredient for the tragic hero—even women and slaves, although on the whole women are "inferior" and slaves are "utterly base."

Nick was shocked into silence.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you that I'm majoring in English at the university, third year?"

She laughed and Nick smiled. He had never seen her at the university. She must have taken night courses, which explains why she worked later at night.

"Are we still burning?" she then asked.

Joey was late from work but Nick didn't mind. He and Lia were on their third round of joints, and tonight Jane's incessant writing was an appropriate view for their first date.

"So Lia, how do you know Joey?"

"He peddles drugs at the university but I haven't seen him there in a while."

Nick looked away.

"He's a character, isn't he?"

"He's got the funniest stories," Lia puffed.

To think, Nick pondered, that someone who hadn't learned how to read yet was considered to be quite the storyteller, by another English major no less.

"What is she writing?"

"I don't know, and it used to bother me, but now it doesn't."

"Why not?" Lia asked.

"It's peaceful to watch."

"I bet Joey hates it."

"You're right, he does. He tells me all the time."

"It's too bad he can't read. I feel sorry for him. It must be frustrating for him not to know if she's writing about him."

"Yeah, I guess it must."

A car obstructed by the corner of the house slowed down and stopped. Two doors opened and closed, almost at the same time. Before long, Joey was stomping through the dark areas of the house before he came to light in the bedroom. He looked dishevelled and unshaven, like a man who spent the night in the same clothes. His very presence disrupted the peace.

In Lia's company, Nick at once felt awkward that he had this view of Joey and Jane from the fire escape. Lia seemed intrigued. She stopped smoking, and Nick worried that she was wasting the joint by letting its ember burn on its own.

"I'm going next door," Joey announced to his wife, looking through drawers in a dresser for something.

"To the hooker's?" Jane didn't even raise her head. The children must have been asleep in their rooms.

"She doesn't fuck at home. I had to do her in the cab, like the others."

"That's nice."

Joey took off his shirt and Nick saw many tattoos. There was a strange oriental symbol on his chest, a lion's head on his back shoulder and a fanged serpent on the inside of his forearm. He walked out of the view of the window for a few seconds and Nick feared he would force himself

on Jane again, and more selfishly, that it would disrupt the connection he was making with Lia, who was mesmerized by the domestic episode. Joey emerged within the frame of the window, buttoning his shirt and putting up his finger as if to suggest that he would be right up to the fire escape shortly.

When he did arrive, they smoked away the night on the fire escape. Giggling, mixing cheap bottles of wine and one that tasted like vinegar. Joey fell asleep with his head pressed against the steel railing, a smirk on his face. Lia had fallen asleep as well on Nick's shoulder. It felt wonderful to be so close to her this way, however unconscious she was of his thoughts. She had redefined herself to him tonight. And she retained her perfection without the drug mart frock or the polite exchanges they were so accustomed to in the company of the cash register. He wanted to kiss her, bad breath and all, but worried that she may awake and discover that he had gone too far, taken advantage of the situation, come out of the character that must have stirred such interest in her that she took it upon herself to ask him to come over. She roused and then whispered in his ear, as if to hide something from Joey, who might have been half awake.

"Do you think he lied about the hooker?"

"I don't know."

"Why does he stay with her?"

She was close enough to kiss him, her eyes glazed, her breath sour.

"Can you call me a cab?"

"Sure."

When Nick went inside, almost relieved not to have to make the first move in that moment, he thought he saw roots growing from his books to the table. He shook his head. They had been opened to the same page for so long that he believed he could distinguish page 142 from the rest. The cab company telephone operator giggled when Nick mentioned his street name. What was he going to do with Joey, who was crashed out on his fire escape? He couldn't just leave him there the whole night. And yet, he couldn't drag him in to his home. That would be crossing a line in the student/teacher relationship, or the one between casual unwelcome acquaintance and potential friend.

Nick poured himself a glass of water and made his way to the window. As he rubbed his eyes, he felt a sick drop in his stomach. An intense hunger, which was starting to make him dizzy. As he came closer he tiptoed so that he wouldn't wake Joey, and provoke another round of burning. But he was already awake. Worse yet, his face was glued to Lia's, one hand up her shirt, roughly moving side to side about those soft breasts while another dug deep within the tight jeans she was wearing. Nick noticed the white

studded belt, unloosed, banging the steel cage. There seemed to be an intense hunger between them as well, as Joey's lips sloppily overlapped onto her face leaving glistening wet marks. Her hands were just as aggressive, one gripping the bulge in his pants violently.

Over their heads Jane was writing with the light on. Unperturbed, and hell bent, it seemed on finishing a thought, or a story, or a means to put into words what she couldn't comprehend in action. And then she looked up as if to feel a stronger interest in her, before turning a new page. Nick retreated back into the kitchen. There, remnants of his neglect were scattered on the table. He would make a trip to the library the next day and return the old books.