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Literary love making in Nicholas Sparks novels: Finding the balance between the writer's life and the writer's work in bestselling Romantic Literature

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Literary Love Making in Nicholas Sparks Novels: Finding the
Balance between the Writer's Life and the Writer's Work in
Bestselling Romantic Literature

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February 6, 2006

Abstract

For almost a decade now Nicholas Sparks has been writing love stories. Not only has he been publishing his stories, but they have received high acclaim in each of their installments. Several of his novels have been made into major motion pictures and increased his popularity quite significantly. His status as a successful romantic fiction writer is undeniable, but the question is, why? What is it about Nicholas Sparks that makes his novels so engaging, and personally, what do I need to do as an aspiring novelist to try and acquire the same literary status? Sparks's novels reach readers at a number of different levels, thus giving them appeal no matter the intellectual intent of the reader. Theoretically, Sparks engages reader response techniques as well as formalist processes such as "habitualization" and "defamiliarization," while also developing engaging plot lines that represent many of the experiences from his own life. His writing is not only academically redeemable, but it is also creatively stimulating; between the two, Sparks represents the thunder and lightning combination all writers strive for while trying to achieve literary success.

This project also offers a creative element in which I attempt to exemplify many of the traits discussed in the analytical sections of this document, by recreating them in a creative, fictitious fashion. Themes such as: motion versus stasis, life versus death, and the ordinary versus the extraordinary all exist within the narrative structure of my short story "Trip to Fall." Besides these thematic elements, the creative section strives to represent the balance Sparks achieves between the experiences of his own life and the fictitious world he creates. Overall, this project delves into the life of Nicholas Sparks to better understand the inspiration for his writing at the level of form as well as content, while also paying tribute to Sparks's style through a representation of his work in my own words.

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Dedication

The writing of this paper is dedicated to four women: one that loved unconditionally until she left this earth, one who has remained in love with a man I wish I could have known, one who taught me the right way to love, and to the woman who will love me for the rest of my life.

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Introduction—Prefacing Remarks

As of the end of 2005, Nicholas Sparks has published 11 major novels, all of which have had extensive success with readers across the United States and elsewhere. As a contemporary American author who is writing in romantic literature, there are a few roadblocks set up against his credibility as a great American author. If given a closer look, Sparks's abilities shine through his popular narratives at the levels of form and technique. By engaging in close, critical readings of Sparks's ten novels, along with his memoir, it is evident that Sparks writes because he cares about the craft of writing as much as he wants to encapsulate experiences from his life and share them with the general public.

At a theoretical level, Nicholas Sparks embraces the statutes of critics such as Victor Shklovsky and Wolfgang Iser. In the way, he is able to take normal people engaged in normal activities and create extraordinary relationships he creates a level of accessibility that is difficult to capture. While creating these realistic landscapes, Sparks is also able to captivate the reader by continually controlling and reformatting their expectations so the story is never entirely predictable. Thus, Sparks forces engagement on the part of his readers, otherwise the cleverness found in his writing would be without purpose if it were not for the inquisitive minds of his readers. Sparks's upbringing and his life as a faithful Catholic, influences his writing on several different levels. Motifs of life versus death and miraculous events are found in each of his novels. No matter the content of his works, Sparks always strives for and completes the task of writing a story that has completeness. Each story is able to stand on its own and comes to a definitive conclusion. Even in the recent case of his first sequel, the second installment of the characters' lives could be read without having read the prequel and the story is still full and satisfying. While Sparks's writing stylistically embraces romantic clichés, his ability to subvert

those clichés is what gives his novels familiarity and yet each is unique from anything written before or after.

Sparks admits that much of inspiration for his novels comes from his own life. While this may be true it is worth considering how much of a balance there is between Sparks's imagination and his sources of inspiration. His life has been full of peaks and valleys since graduating college, and through each of these experiences Sparks's has matured and relished in the power of family, brotherhood, and most importantly, love. Each of these characteristics shines at different moments within his novels. Whether it may be a character's name that comes from Sparks's life, or how one character's loss represents a loss felt in his life, each occasion is felt with full emotional outpouring from the reader because of the close relationship Sparks forges between his life and his work. Because of the blurred boundary Sparks establishes between his life and lives he creates on the printed page, he has managed to endear himself to many readers of romantic literature. His style varies significantly from other subgenres within romantic literature such as the harlequin romance and the erotic novel. Beyond that, Sparks stands alone within the love story subgenre. Few other romantic authors have shared the success over the last decade that Sparks has managed to accomplish. In any case, Sparks's writing is awe inspiring because of its accessibility, its relevance, its subject matter, and most importantly, its biographical implications.

As an aspiring writer, it is comforting to read a writer such as Nicholas Sparks that is so centered on family, friends, and fellowship for inspiration in his works. For this reason, I chose to write a short creative work that represents many of the characteristics found within the analytical sections of this thesis. For example, the main male character's name is the first name of my childhood and current best friend. Each name was selected from somewhere within my

life, whether it be an interest or an actual person, all of the character's traits can be pinpointed within my own life. Also, there is a fateful quality to the flow of the narrative. Put differently, all of the exchanges in the storyline are not planned, which allows for influence to come from a greater force. The way in which characters are described, specifically with relation to their eyes, is inspired by descriptions found within Sparks's novels. Lastly, the love that develops by the end of the story attempts to encompass the intense compassion and emotional catharsis found in every Sparks novel. Overall, this thesis is a conglomeration of first deconstructing the writing of a great American author, and then reconstructing it to help me gain an understanding of how one day I too can claim literary hegemony like Nicholas Sparks.

I. The Theoretical Implications

As far as poetic form, Nicholas Sparks theoretically embraces the concepts of theorists Victor Shklovsky and Wolfgang Iser. Since Sparks comes perilously close to writing cliché, and yet he is able to subvert it at the same time, he embarks on Shklovsky's process of "defamiliarization" (Lodge 21). Shklovsky's essay, "Art as Technique," focuses on how unconsciously writing, and more generally life, is an act that becomes redundant. Shklovsky offers the example: "if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree" (19). This particular maxim applies directly to a writer like Sparks. Given all of the literature that circulates in his particular genre, whether it is the harlequin romance or the less explicit romance novel, how is it that Sparks rises above mediocrity and reaches acclaim with the general public? In Shklovsky's terms, Sparks's success lies in his ability to 'defamiliarize' the reader from habitual topics of discussion. As a topic of discussion, love, in all of its idiosyncrasies, has been laboriously described by practically every author that produces a relationship between characters. Therefore, it follows that descriptions on the subject of love could certainly overlap between authors and even books. Sparks is well aware of his surroundings in literature and artfully embraces while still reforming the very clichés that define his genre. For example, Sparks's primary female characters are predominantly blonde with soft eyes, either blue or hazel, and rather stunning features. This image serves as most men's ideal woman, and yet each is different from the other. While there may be physical similarity between characters each lives a significantly different life and walks a different path in finding love. In some ways, readers of Sparks experience his novels because

they know exactly what to expect at the level of character. Characters are typically physically attractive, but not necessarily striking. What makes them memorable is their amiability, both males and females are virtuous, kind, all around good people. In a *New York Times* interview, Sparks offers: “I try to keep my men regular guys, doing regular things. Characters in love stories have to be in common settings, but have to meet in original ways and fall in love in original ways” (Arnold E3). While Sparks’s characters may be ‘common’ in their attributes what make them atypical are their actions.

There is a duality between the ordinary and the extraordinary found in Sparks’s characters. While the typical Sparks male could be a fisherman, a cop, a writer, a troubled youth, nothing too exciting, his ability to accomplish great feats makes him extraordinary at the level of character. Taylor McAden in *The Rescue* (2000) is a volunteer firefighter who not only accomplishes the daily feat of saving a child’s life, but also manages to teach the boy to speak although he has battled with a severe speech impediment his entire life. In this way, McAden has gone above and beyond even the normalcy of his already extraordinary lifestyle. Using this particular example, one can quickly see the reciprocal nature of this theme. Not only is McAden extraordinary with his heralded lifestyle as a firefighter, but he makes the education of Sarah Andrews’s son seem habitual.

Landon Carter in *A Walk to Remember* (1999) is an unruly teenager who is humbled once he meets the somewhat socially awkward Jamie Sullivan. Initially, Landon’s character seems rather basic since being ‘a devil without a cause’ is not really a difficult task. Jamie’s introduction into his life changes not only his attitude but is the catalyzing force behind the heroic acts of love that come at the novel’s conclusion. Even though Landon knows that Jamie will lose her battle with leukemia he still decides to marry her. Landon’s choice is central to the

redemption of his character. His decisions not only restore faith in humanity, but more importantly, they reconfirm the sanctity found in the vows of marriage: ‘in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, until death do us part.’ For Landon, his everlasting love is what lifts him above his past and allows him to transcend to heroic levels.

Concerning the thread of marriage, Wilson Lewis in *The Wedding* (2003) early in the novel says:

In the course of my marriage, I’ve been selfish and stubborn and as ignorant as a goldfish, and it pains me to realize this about myself. Yet, looking back, I believe that if I’ve done one thing right, it has been to love my wife throughout our years together. While this may strike some as a feat not worth mentioning, you should know that there was a time when I was certain that my wife didn’t feel the same way about me. (3)

With this as a backdrop for the novel, it seems obvious that the narrator can go nowhere but up in his marriage, but the important question is how far can he go? It is the extent that Wilson goes to that makes his character extraordinary. Through the course of the novel he is able to include an entire town in a secret; the secret being a surprise wedding at which he will renew his vows with his wife. Without reading *The Wedding* it is obvious just from these two moments in the novel the distance traveled by this seemingly complacent character.

Lastly, and probably most famously, the character of Noah Calhoun in *The Notebook* (1996) should be considered in this discussion. Noah, a young, untamed, love struck teenager, falls hopelessly in love with Allie Nelson. The Nelson’s, a wealthy family, move to New Bern, North Carolina and change Noah’s life forever. Even though their love is never supported by the Nelson family, Noah and Allie continue to fall even more in love with each passing summer

evening. Their relationship halts along with the end of the summer and it appears all is lost. Noah's greatness lies in his diligence, his love pushed him to write one letter each month for two and a half years without ever receiving a reply. Even more significantly, Noah fulfills a promise that he made to Allie the night they first made love; he all but single-handedly restores an eighteenth century plantation home in her honor. Noah later loses her love to mental illness, Alzheimer's captures her ability to remember the love they shared a lifetime before. Noah's meticulousness reappears as he daily sits with his soul mate to read to her from the very notebook that chronicles their life and love for one another. His patience even destabilizes truth in medicine, Allie's nurse comments: "I don't know how you do it. You even beat her disease sometimes. Even though the doctors don't understand it, we nurses do. It's love, it's as simple as that. It's the most incredible thing I've ever seen" (203). None of these characters possesses superpowers yet each is able to accomplish extraordinary feats for those they keep close to their heart. Referring back to the earlier theoretical discussion, defamiliarization certainly plays a role in the success of these characters as not only believable, but also memorable. By forcing readers into a world that is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, personal understanding can be embraced as well as reformatted all at once.

In his essay, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," Wolfgang Iser posits that "it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism" (Lodge 216). In order for a story to elicit a 'dynamic' response, a reader must be present to interact with the omission of important information within the narrative. Writers generally write for the engagement of a readership, this is obvious, what is less apparent is the methodology behind creating interest within a reader. In *The Guardian* (2003), the title alone suggests an array of questions that force the text to answer through its plot. Who is the guardian? What is the

guardian guarding? How many guardians are there? By the end of the text, readers are left with a few workable responses to these interrogations of the title. Singer, Julie Barenson's dog, ultimately saves her from being shot by Richard Franklin, her estranged lover. But at the level of symbol, Singer serves as a reincarnation of Julie's deceased husband. Therefore, in the space created by the ambiguity of the guardian's identity, one is able to extrapolate meaning which gives the text its ultimate appeal. In Iser's terms, "These gaps have a different effect on the process of anticipation and retrospection, and thus on the 'gestalt' of the virtual dimension, for they may be filled in different ways" (216). A particular conception on the part of the reader must be reevaluated when in the presence of one of these authorial omissions. The 'gestalt' that Iser refers to in the previous statement must be actively realized by the reader in order for the text to have completeness. There is interdependency between text and reader, without one the other lacks entire significance and is fraught with problematic ambiguity.

These gaps are filled by anticipation and retrospection in a text. While these terms can exist separately they also are intimately bound to one another. For example, early on in *The Guardian* a reference to photography forces reader to raise quizzical eyebrow as to the significance of its meaning. When asked about his hobbies Richard Franklin says, "I used to do a little photography, though. I took a few courses in college, and for a short time there, I actually considered making it my career. Even bought some equipment" (40). Readers mentally are on the lookout for important pieces of information that will help inform as well as reform the text as it goes along. On this topic, Wolfgang Iser writes:

Every sentence contains a preview of the next and forms a kind of viewfinder for what is to come; and this in turn changes the 'preview' and so becomes a 'viewfinder' for what has been read. This whole process represents the

fulfillment of the potential, unexpressed reality of the text, but it is to be seen only as a framework for a great variety of means by which the virtual dimension may be brought into being. (Lodge 215-6)

The statement made before the block quotation needs to be qualified a little further. Initially, a reader may not think of the information regarding Richard's hobbies that telling, but for a reader reading the book a subsequent time red flags immediately fly up. Later in the novel, when Richard's house is raided by the police a laboratory full of pictures of Julie Barenson is found, thus solidifying Richard's infatuation with her. Ultimately, the serial number on the camera confiscated from his house provides the authorities with information regarding his true identity as well as his history of spousal abuse. When considered retrospectively, the reader realizes that there was a small piece of insight offered early in the text about Richard's hobbies that even though it was offered with banality, provides the seed of foreshadowing that blooms into the obsession that the authorities uncover later. All of this plot development unfolds from a seemingly nonchalant comment about hobbies and upon a second reading would be missed entirely if these mental methods of close reading were nonexistent.

In *A Walk to Remember*, after being asked to the homecoming dance Jamie Sullivan accepts and then adds the odd comment, "'You have to promise you won't fall in love with me'" (44). Because this statement comes early in the novel, readers are immediately put on alert given the fortitude of this response, especially when put in context of what is being asked. Also, the concept of two people falling in love seems like something that a teenage girl would want to embrace, not refuse, yet Jamie seems adamant about staying out of love with Landon Carter. As the novel progresses the reader as well as Landon learns that Jamie has leukemia which ultimately will take her life. For this reason, Jamie tried valiantly to tie herself to as few people

as possible so that when her day came to leave the world she would not hurt so many. Jamie's offhand response to being asked to a dance seems much more relevant once the reader acquires the knowledge of Jamie's health condition. But even knowing Jamie has leukemia sets up another entire set of anticipatory and retrospective responses. Sparks seems aware of this theoretical technique as each novel exists as its own echo chamber. Each statement Sparks writes is read separately by a readership, yet each statement speaks to a moment yet to come, and that future moment clarifies the edifying moment that came before. In this way, the conflict found in Sparks's novels plays out like a lengthy tennis match, the plot driven ball continually bounces back and forth until conflict is resolved. While the victor literarily lives in the text, ultimately it is the reader who finds the most gratification at the point of conflict resolution, because he or she has been privy to each volley, and therefore, understands the text at a higher, fuller, more metaphysical level than any of the characters present within the text itself.

II. Narrative Techniques and A Commentary on Sequels

The most extraordinary events in Sparks's novels are those that seem to occur with the assistance of a form of divine intervention. Put differently, a heroic act is a feat in itself, but when compared to the birth of a child to parents medically deeded impotent, or the union of two people after being apart for decades, these events are more than extraordinary, they are miraculous. The cliché "miracles happen everyday" is certainly in play within Sparks's novels. There are several significant examples of such heaven-sent happenings in each of Sparks's eleven books including his memoir. As the reader is about to exit *True Believer* (2005), Lexie Darnell announces to Jeremy Marsh "'Here's our miracle,' she whispered. 'It's a girl'" (322).

Jeremy Marsh tells Lexie earlier in the novel that he is infertile and unable to have children. Lexie accepts this with a grain of salt and continues to fall helplessly in love with Jeremy. Jamie Sullivan in *A Walk to Remember* is only kept alive by Landon Carter's constant attention. As leukemia strips her body of health it is combated by the strong volition of Landon's heart. As mentioned earlier, in *The Notebook*, Noah Calhoun patiently cares for his wife, Allie, who has Alzheimer's disease. Singer, Julie Barenson's dog in *The Guardian* after eating hamburgers laced with rat poison somehow attacks Richard Franklin as he catches Julie. Even though the novel ends terribly tragically, the whole premise of *Message in a Bottle* (1998), and the other novels cited, exemplifies the miraculous nature of Sparks's novels. Theresa Osborne finds a bottle with a message written in it, and eventually falls in love with Garrett Blake, the author of the message. If one considers the likelihood of these happenings it seems slim, but possibility catalyzed by the power of love can bring any unlikelihood to fruition.

At the level of narrative technique, Sparks plays with the motif of movement versus stasis. Like most binaries, the terms are not only mutually exclusive; rather they are also inextricably bound up in one another. The image of running on a treadmill demonstrates this point. The person on the treadmill is in motion yet he or she is making no progress since the treadmill is static. Depending on one's biases one could deconstruct this image and support or refute one side over the other. For this reason, the motif itself is problematic because it centrally concerns the intended response of the reader in order to work properly. Sparks's mastery of literary technique guides readers into corners where only his version of reality will stand and thus the motif becomes digestible. Most importantly, close analysis of the decisions made by Sparks as to why in moments that are static there could be motion, and is not, will help

illuminate his claim: “Romance novels must end happily. Love stories have to have a tragedy” (*NY Times* E3).

In the novel *A Bend in the Road* (2001), Miles Ryan’s life seems as uneventful as any police officer’s life could be that lives in a small town. Each day is full of paper work and a few traffic violations, but more than anything his job consists of reminding the patrons of New Bern, North Carolina that he represents the law. A widower, for Miles Ryan each day passes seamlessly into the next with his only real companion being his son Jonah. As a ground situation, this is a fairly inactive one. The movement in this tale does not initially come from the primary character; rather it is the enigmatic unidentified narrator who pushes the mystery along, claiming: “[I]t is my story as well” (4). Generally speaking, the shape of Sparks’s narrative moves towards one of two different outcomes: either a character falls in love and starts a family, or a character falls in love and then has that love stripped away from them in death. Obviously, the path taken to these two outcomes has numerous different routes and it is the journey along these conduits that makes Sparks engaging.

The Guardian opens with Julie Barenson in mourning much like Miles Ryan’s emotional state. The holiday season offers little joy for Julie Barenson as she is alone since her husband died tragically the year before. The first twenty or so pages of the novel run rather slowly through exposition on Julie’s past and have relatively little motion. The novel then is jump started with the inception of tall, dark, and handsome Richard Franklin. Just as the novel begins to flow towards a romantic relationship between the two new found lovers, this thread is detoured craftily by Sparks. *The Guardian*, Sparks’s only to date crime/mystery/romance novel, moves frighteningly fast as Julie and her true love Mike Harris run from Richard’s obsessive grasp and the cops try arduously to uncover why Richard is after Julie and how they can stop him

before he strikes. The novel closes with Mike and Julie together but is not concluded without tragedy. The character after whom the novel is titled, Singer, a Great Dane who has been Julie's 'guardian' since the death of her first husband dies at Richard's cruel hands.

A Bend in the Road and *The Guardian* are but two examples of many in Sparks's writing that provide a useful backdrop for the theme of motion versus stasis. The most identifiable moments of stasis in Sparks's novels are those found at the end. Even in novels where Sparks has decided to write a sequel to one of his best sellers, as is the case with *The Wedding* and *At First Sight* (2005), each of the prequels stands on its own with a conclusion that is completely closed. These novels are each its own entity, and within that entity each of the characters comes to a place of resolution by novel's end. Consider *Nancy Drew* mysteries, or other popular collections like *The Hardy Boys* or *The Boxcar Children*. In each of these examples readers enter each new narrative with the same characters. The novel begins with a question and ends with the resolution of that question. Each mystery follows the same structure, there is a formula that each tale must follow otherwise it would not fit the mold for that type of mystery. Another form that Sparks's sequels exist just outside of is the American short story tradition. Collections of short stories such as ZZ Packer's *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, Lorrie Moore's *Birds of America*, Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*, as well as others, each act as stories within a greater overarching concept. Sparks most closely ascribes to this version of myth making with his stories all concerning the topic of love. But even this critique of his writing does not fit completely. Sparks suggests that his "stories are believable, as if they could happen to anyone" which is not to say that the prior examples are any less believable, it is just that each is written with such specificity of purpose that the 'any man' quality found in Sparks's novels is not present (nicholassparks.com).

Most recently, Sparks released *At First Sight* which is the sequel to his novel released in April of 2005 entitled *True Believer*. The noteworthy part of this fact is while Sparks created *The Wedding* as a pseudo-sequel to *The Notebook* the central characters in the sequel are the children of Allie and Noah from *The Notebook*. In the *At First Sight* example the characters are the same two as the prequel, what makes the sequel significant is not simply that it is another chronicle of the love between Jeremy Marsh and Lexie Darnell, but the inception of a new character from Jeremy's past complicates the sturdy relationship. This discussion of Sparks sequels clarifies the point that each novel ends completely, a 'To Be Continued' or an ellipsis does not exist even if there is a tale to follow. The point is that Sparks pushes the narrative along until it reaches a point where minimal conflict exists, but no readership has that much interest in the perfect union of two people. This is not to say that the perfect love found between two people is not intriguing, but once this love has been established, the absence of conflict disengages the reader from the storyline. The reader has to keep in mind Sparks's comment about his own genre when we think about this motif. Certainly the stories that end most tragically are those where a life has been lost in the pursuit of love, so the character that is left behind must 'move on.' Even in the term there appears to be motion, but the process of mourning as a process of change is not one worth developing, unless it is the catalyzing force in the novel's development (referencing *A Bend in the Road*, *The Guardian*). What makes this motif central to the development of plot in Sparks's writing is its centrality in the engagement of those who read his novels. Sparks's mastery of the craft lies in his ability to elicit a particular response from his readers.

Nicholas Sparks writes love stories and each tale of finding love differs, but each tale has a structure that is worth noting. While this concept may not be universally applicable to all

writers that write romantic literature, and it may not even be true in the more refined category of love stories, but within Sparks's novels there is a method to snag the reader that occurs more times than not. Generally speaking, the flow of one of Sparks's love stories starts with one primary character. Sometimes this character has just gone through a tough time in their life, for example they have lost their spouse or something along those lines. No matter the demeanor of this primary character the story centers around this individual for probably the first portion of the novel. At some point, a second character begins to play a significant role in the life of the first primary character and the second portion of the novel documents the process of the second character actively pursuing the first and the meditations the second has about the first. Once both characters realize that each has an interest in the other the third portion of the novel documents the process of falling and grants equal narration to the two characters. In the final section of the novel a few different possibilities exist. In some cases, a character dies thus breaking up the union of the two new found lovers. When this happens it is typically the second character found in the novel that leaves the first behind. The other option is the more bittersweet ending where something material must be given up for the ultimate union of the two characters. In this case the same structure holds, it is usually the second character that has been introduced that must give up something to be with his or her love interest. This is only a general outline and it is difficult to really grasp it without examples from the texts themselves.

In one of Sparks's most popular novels, *The Notebook*, the story begins with Noah Calhoun who is a young, untamed teenager of proud but impoverished blood. He falls in love immediately at the sight of Allie Nelson who is a very well-to-do young girl from the big city. The biggest section of the book has the two characters apart and yet throughout one is not far from the thoughts of the other. Once Allie breaks off her engagement and decided to start a life

with Noah the story jumps to the couple's experiences in old age. While ultimately at the end of the novel both characters drift towards eternity together in the form of the afterlife, it has been Allie's life that was the first to deteriorate. Allie was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and when she was committed to an assisted living home Noah checked himself in as well so he could be with his wife practically every second of the day. In this tale, the structure holds because Allie was the primary character's pursuit and she was the first character to experience loss while still in love. Similarly, *A Message in a Bottle* begins with Theresa Osborne finding a bottle on her trip to Cape Cod with her boss. For a couple chapters the novel documents the difficult life of the divorced Theresa Osborne, then the narrative shifts to Theresa's attempt to meet the man who has written the message she found in the bottle while at Cape Cod. Theresa is taken aback by the mystery man's romantic nature and what like to know what has happened in his life to inspire him to leave bottles out to see. Thus, Garrett Blake enters the narrative and rapidly he finds himself interested in Theresa even though he has all but forced himself to stay out of love in honor of his deceased wife Catherine. As the relationship progresses questions of commitment are offered and Garrett is faced with the decision of whether or not to continue to be alone or start a new life with Theresa. Unfortunately at the end of the novel Garrett is swallowed up by the very sea that he has been tied to for most of his life. Once again the character that has been pursued by the primary character is the first to lose in the story.

In the case of the bittersweet ending a few fit the general structure outlined above, *The Guardian* and *True Believer*. In the first story the narrative starts centering on Julie Barenson's character and her canine Christmas gift planned by her husband just before he died. Then quickly two pursuers enter the mix, Richard Franklin and Mike Harris, the two are antithetically related and Julie is forced to try and make a decision between them. Midway through the

narrative it seems evident that she wants to be with Mike, but this acceptance is one Richard is not willing to make. By the end of the story, the epilogue explains that Mike and Julie have forged a life together and they even have a baby on the way, but just prior to the epilogue, Julie's dog Singer dies trying to protect her from Richard Franklin who has been trying to hunt her down for leaving him. While *True Believer* lacks the tension found in Sparks's only pseudo-thriller, the same premise exists for the bittersweet ending between Jeremy Marsh and Lexie Darnell. The story begins with Jeremy Marsh heading from New York City down to North Carolina to explore a local myth. While in town he falls for Lexie Darnell and actively pursues her during the time he is around town. Although Sparks breaks the pattern slightly with this novel in that Lexie is the one being pursued and yet she is not the one that experiences any real tangible losses as is the case in the other examples. Jeremy makes the decision to leave all that he knows about the big city in order to start a life in small town North Carolina with Lexie. While it may not be as materially significant, Lexie, in falling in love with Jeremy, allows herself to get over her complex of males being nothing but a negative influence in her life. No matter the structure, or how the story ends, each of Sparks's novels strives for equality between the two primary characters throughout the majority of the novel. Other than the loss experienced at different degrees at the end of the stories, each primary character receives equal focus. This decision is made logically because the balance found in Sparks's narratives is the same balance that exists in the relationships he hopes to exemplify in each of his love stories.

III. Family, Faith, and Forging Ahead: Biography becomes Fiction in Sparks's Novels

Nicholas Sparks's own life and his family's faith, past and present, provide the foundation for his fictitious creations. Brought up Catholic, he went on in life to find his true love, a woman by the name of Cathy who also happened to be of the same faith. In his memoir, Sparks describes his wife in the following manner, "Like me, she was Catholic and went to church every Sunday. She was also a middle child, though one of four. Like me, she had an older brother and a younger sister. Her parents, like mine, were poor before attaining middle-class status, had never been divorced, and shared the *same* anniversary" (191). Nicholas and Cathy Sparks's complementary faith and life experiences ultimately formed a lasting union between them; therefore, it seems fitting that faith complements the pages, sometimes literally and other times metaphorically, of every Sparks novel.

Nicholas Sparks grew up in two very different locations, but whether he was in Minnesota or California, his life centered on his family. Exploratory adventures with his brother, Micah, are among the fondest memories of his childhood. His sister, Dana, always provided the brothers with sound advice, being that she was the only other female in the house, and closely resembled her mother. Concerning Mr. and Mrs. Sparks's relationship, their connection to each other as well as their children is by far the most complicated. It is this association though that acts as the pervasive background for who Nicholas is as a person, and why he creates certain literary landscapes as a writer. In his memoir, *Three Weeks with My Brother* (2004), Nicholas writes at length about the strange family dynamic his family shared, and how through all the awkwardness they still thrived. In trying to define the relationship between Nicholas's parents, the easiest term to use would be that their life together made each of them feel "comfortable."

Through all the arguments and their temporary separation across a time zone, they “had a comfortable relationship” (85). While it is not love that would captivate viewers on the silver screen, Sparks kindly describes his parents in his memoir:

While they weren’t overtly affectionate most of the time, they weren’t needy, possessive, or jealous either. I never heard either of them say something negative about the other, and I seldom heard them argue anymore. They’d put the past behind them more successfully than most, and seemed to be exactly what the other one needed. (85)

The love found in the Sparks’s household may not exemplify the quintessential definition, but each parent was able to affect the children’s lives each in his or her own way. Sparks’s view on the chemistry his parents shared is described strangely. To say that a couple of people are ‘exactly what the other needed’ comes across as the zenith in any relationship, and yet the very statement is offset by the fact that ‘they weren’t overtly affectionate’ with one another. The conflict found in this quotation represents the uncertainty of character that resonates from each page of Sparks’s memoir. Page after page, it appears that Nicholas, as well as Micah, struggle through various childhood and young adult experiences each grasping for positive connotations to the events of their complex upbringing. Without devaluing the words of Sparks himself, it’s worth questioning whether or not such a romanticized, and similarly reverent perspective would be present in the memoir if his parents were still alive. There is no doubt that Sparks has been shaped by his familial experiences, but one has to wonder, given that Sparks is tremendously influenced by his own life, do his novels represent the relationships he experienced within his own upbringing, or are the moments of strong familial influence a product of Nicholas writing about the way life should have been in the Sparks household? While the issue is certainly one

worth debating, what is even more important is the content of the debate itself, which centers on family, and familial influence.

As an example, Nicholas offers a tale about the day he asked his mother if he could play Pop Warner football. As the discussion came to its close, Nicholas was no closer to playing football than when the argument started, and his mother had yet again backed him into a corner where the only way out was to see things her way. Sparks reflects, “The older I got, the more I hated these arguments, because I lost every one of them. But still, deep down, I could never escape the feeling that my mom was probably right about most things. After all, she spoke from experience” (128). This single image reflects many of the relationships between parent and child in Sparks’s novels. No matter the age, youthful characters when lost are righted by their elder predecessors. Just as Nicholas’s mom was able to make Nicholas believe that he did not really want to play football, many of the parents in the novels go through much of the same reverse psychology with their offspring. This form of character interaction is not only significant because of its repetition within Sparks’s texts, but more so because it directly reflects the upbringing of the writer himself. While it would be a stretch to say that Sparks is offering a particular form of parenting within his novels, he is in small accord valorizing his childhood as well as the advisory relationship he shared with his family throughout his life.

In *Message in a Bottle*, Garrett Blake vacillates on whether or not to stay with his new found love, or continue to pay homage to his first love that is deceased. The battle Garrett has between his present and his past is ultimately mediated by his father, who also has had the experience of lost love. The parallel experiences of father and son creates a comfortable dialogue between them, but more importantly, the conversations between them evolve much like the aforementioned example from Sparks’s own life. Ultimately, Garrett’s father coerces him

into understanding that he is missing out on a life altering opportunity by confining himself to a life he can no longer live. Jeb Blake argues with his son about his son's dismissal of his new love by pointing out to him that just days ago he was thinking of proposing marriage. When Garrett explains his reasoning, Jeb responds:

Yeah, you've explained your reasons, but you haven't been honest about it. Not with me, not with Theresa, not even with yourself. She may not have told you about the letters, and granted, maybe she should have. But that's not why you're still angry now. You're angry because she made you realize something that you didn't want to admit. (298)

What Garrett has not wanted to admit to this point in the novel is that he has not let go of the love and loss that he felt for his deceased wife, Catherine. What Jeb Blake does in this scene is reiterate for his son things he already knows about himself but is unwilling to admit. This is but one instance in Sparks's novels that represents the relationship he had with his mother throughout his life. Whether it is making a child understand he is too small for Pop Warner football and that life is not always fair, or making a grown adult realize that happiness lies just on the other side of his own stubbornness, both are forms of positive familial presence that ultimately reform the struggling individual into a more knowledgeable one. Characters throughout the Sparks canon look towards their family for advice whenever their path is unclear. Nicholas's writing career began with an offhand remark from his mother who just wanted Nick to leave her alone for a little while, "Write a book," she said, and the rest is history. Even a comment made somewhat in jest was accepted by her son as a worthy suggestion from his mother, and it is these suggests that dot the pages of every Sparks novel as characters search to find their path in love and in life. This path, no matter the number of installments in the form of

Sparks's novels, never becomes worn because tragedy always diverts a character's track from all that they thought they knew. This is evident in the *Message in a Bottle* example as well as other novels, but more specifically, tragedy exists as one of the most essential catalysts within Nicholas Sparks's own life.

In just over a decade Nicholas Sparks went through the experiences of becoming a millionaire, starting a family, and burying three of the most important people in his life. After graduating college and getting married to his wife Catherine, a job as a pharmaceutical representative provided his life with temporary stability. Then in 1989 his mother died tragically falling off of a horse and having a cerebral hemorrhage. The loss of his 47 year old mother sent his family into tough times. Nicholas's father became a recluse, and both of Sparks's siblings scrambled for mental and emotional strength. A few years later Nicholas Sparks got his big break, his first major novel, *The Notebook*, was bought by Warner Books for a million dollars. As Sparks readied himself for his first ever book tour, he received the startling news that his father had died tragically in a car accident. The Sparks children were left all alone without any parents to look over them, and just as quickly as they found comfort in each other's arms security became tattered yet again. After giving birth to beautiful twins after years of battling seizures, Nicholas's sister Dana lost her battle to brain tumors and left her two brothers as the remaining members of the Sparks lineage. At probably one of the worst times of his life, Nicholas Sparks was able to deliver some of the most representative words of not only who he is as a person, but more specifically how he writes as an author. In the eulogy at his sister's funeral Sparks said, "I told [the congregation] to remember my sister with a smile, like I did, for even though she was being buried near my parents, the best parts of her would always stay alive, deep within our hearts" (326-7). Loss in a Sparks novel, while physically permanent in its ramifications, only

temporarily possesses one's emotions in a negative manner. Evidently this too has been contrived from Sparks's own life experiences given the eulogy he delivered at his sister's graveside. While the physical body is no more, the great influence of a particular person along with their ideals is timeless and will affect others for as long as they are present on this earth.

The death of his wife sent Patrick Sparks into an emotional tailspin, from which is life was never entirely the same. Nicholas makes the admission that his father was able to find love again before his death, but for a long time no one in his extended family could seem to soften up the hardened widower. The characteristics of his father during this time of conflict find their way into many of the novels that Nicholas has written. *A Bend in the Road*, *Message in a Bottle*, *The Guardian*, and *Nights in Rodanthe* (2002) all deal with the topic of lost love and the process of overcoming the depression surrounding these difficult times that are full of unanswerable questions. Garrett Blake's situation in *Message in a Bottle* certainly seems to represent the condition Nicholas's father had to confront after losing his wife. Even though they may not have shared the same type of relationship as the fictitious Garrett and Catherine Blake, the love shared between Patrick and Jill Sparks made enough of an imprint to deeply affect the lives of those around them. The real life loss of those people in Sparks's life rivals the losses of the characters within his novels with one exception. Besides the fact that his novels are not necessarily autobiographical, the novels produce an element of sentimentality that is not even present within Sparks's memoir. While Nicholas and his brother recount their life over the course of a three week tour of the world, Nicholas's novels are written with such compassion that they exist just outside of reality. The best way to define this phenomenon is to suggest that Nicholas inflects his narratives to make up for the spaces left behind his mother's complacency or his father's detached nature. Therefore, while Sparks's characters certainly appear to represent certain

people within his own life, it is worth considering that many of his characters are created as responses to the voids felt within his own experience. “My mom was an amazing woman, but I would have understood her even better if she had acted like X in this particular situation” or, “my father made a large impact on my life through the way he avoided traumatic situations in his family’s life, I think it would have been better if he had done X instead.” Now these are merely hypothetical quotations, but they seem relevant in trying to understand the thought processes of Sparks as he creates these characters that he admits are inspired by his own life.

In *A Bend in the Road*, Miles Ryan makes it his life’s work to understand what exactly happened during the tragic hit and run accident that killed his wife. A happy marriage with the addition of a beautiful son quickly changed into a painful life of single parenting. As the story comes to its climax, Miles learns that the death of his wife happened accidentally at the hands of his new love interest’s brother. Once again Miles is beside himself with grief now knowing the truth about his wife’s final hours. In the end, Miles allows his wife’s killer to live on, only on the condition that he goes out into the world and makes himself into something. This last directive seems to exemplify the step Sparks takes from his own life to the narrative reality he creates. Although it may be a stretch, if Nicholas were able to look through Miles Ryan’s son’s eyes and understand the whole situation that his father was confronted with, it would seem that his response to the situation is the most redeemable one. In all the descriptions offered in his memoir, Sparks would have a difficult time defining his father in the same manner he creates Miles Ryan, because his father’s detached nature and nonchalance would not allow for the response that Ryan offers.

Sparks’s memoir documents the changes his family experienced throughout their history and how their transformations overtime affected everyone in the family in different ways. At

times Nicholas would be closer to his sister than his brother, because his brother was older and did not want to spend time with his little brother. Mr. Sparks oftentimes could be found humming to try and subdue his short temper, which when described by Nicholas had stages like a nuclear reactor explosion. If his father was about to reach DEFCON 4 it was time to get as far away as possible. As his father aged, his emotional outbursts lessened in their regularity and his compassion for his family started to return and he became much less of a recluse. One of the best representations of change found in the Sparks canon comes in the form of Landon Carter in *A Walk to Remember*. Landon's unruly behavior forces the principal of his school to impose community service and his immediate placement as a lead in the school play. While the latter may not seem like much of a punishment, for an unruly cool kid who most closely resembles James Dean, life as a thespian is not one he would choose. Through his experience he winds up falling in love with Jamie Sullivan and ultimately decides to marry her even though he knows she has been diagnosed with leukemia. With all of the distress that surrounds a debilitating disease such as leukemia, Landon is always positive and motivating towards his love and her family. Her father, a minister, initially looks upon Landon with concern knowing enough about him to believe he is beyond saving due to his belligerent actions. Jamie believes in the good that lies deep within Landon and it is this belief that is ultimately reciprocated by Landon after Jamie passes away. Although their initial perceptions of one another were strained through the tragic loss of a woman they both loved the two become extremely close and are the best of friends by the novel's end. In the same way, that the loss of their sister Dana to a brain tumor only brought the Sparks brothers closer together, the same holds true for the relationship between Jamie's father and her husband Landon.

When times are bad it seems that in the life of Nicholas Sparks the most events occur. To put things differently, when times are at their worst the most amount of knowledge about oneself and life more generally is acquired. In the case of Julie Barenson in *The Guardian*, her husband's best friend, Mike Harris, has been there for her as long as she knew her husband and the small town of Swansboro, North Carolina. What takes her a long time to realize is that her husband's best friend is most suited to fill the void left by his death. *The Guardian* is arguably Sparks most original work because it pulls in characteristics from other genres outside of romantic literature. The novel is mysterious while also being a thriller, along with its romantic implications. It is important to consider Sparks's own commentary on writing the novel in order to fully understand the creative process he went through on his most complex novel.

While I've read hundreds – even thousands – of thrillers, I wanted to build in a quality love story as well. Many thrillers have characters that fall in love in the course of the story, but the love story is always subordinated to the mystery and tension of the mystery itself. I wanted to write a novel with exactly the opposite effect. I wanted to write a love story with thriller elements, not a thriller with characters who fall in love. There are other differences as well between love stories and thrillers; love stories require a slower pace with detailed settings, while thrillers require a fast pace, with limited settings. Love stories are usually written with two major characters, and – at the most – three other minor characters. Thrillers have three major characters, at least two major-minor characters, and a dozen minor characters, with all the lives intertwining. In the end, *The Guardian* essentially became two books in one; a love story, romantically slow in building, which was gradually replaced by a story with ever-

increasing danger, written at an ever increasing pace. I say this in retrospect; at the time I was writing, my thoughts weren't nearly that clear.

(nicholassparks.com)

Sparks's commentary not only illuminates the difficulties of the writing process, but more significantly it clarifies the balance found between love and tragedy, or more generally, life and death. As the thriller aspects of the novel reach their climax, the romantic elements of the novel also approach their pinnacle state. With the loss of Julie Barensen's animal companion Singer and the near loss of her new love, Julie receives final confirmation about her future. Singer, her guardian, may no longer be a part of the physical world, but thanks to his bravery he was able to pass the touch of protection to Mike who loves Julie endlessly. The duress created by Richard Franklin's stalking and his obsession with Julie ultimately pushes the plot to a level where life and death collide like high and low pressure in the atmosphere. After the storm has calmed, once the reader sorts through the wreckage clear-cut resolution for every character has occurred. While the loss of Singer is tragic, the definitive position Mike now will have in Julie's life brings a positive spin to the story as a whole. Much like the close-knit nature of the Sparks siblings as their family unit was stripped one by one; a new closeness was forged by the remaining members after each tragedy. This same maxim exists in every tragedy found in Sparks's novels.

IV. Finding Inspiration and the Process of Character Development

Besides all of the tragedy present in Nicholas Sparks's life, his daily existence influences his writing as well. Playing the roles of father, husband, coach, and mentor all factor into the creation process of each of his novels. More than his own life experiences he looks to the people

who make up his world to find inspiration as well. A close reader does not have to read to deeply to find names and characteristics that are tremendously reminiscent of people within Sparks's life. Whether it is using the names of members of his family, friends, agents, editors, or movie producers Sparks constantly is constantly name dropping, or developing characters based upon characteristics present within people found in his own life. If one spends just a short period of time on Nicholas Sparks's personal website he or she is privy to an abundance of information about where his inspiration derives from in each of his novels. In *The Notebook*, Sparks wanted to create a love story that as accurately as possible represented albeit defined true love between two people. He states plainly that his inspiration for the novel came from those close to him:

The Notebook was originally inspired by the story of my wife's grandparents.

They had a truly magical relationship, one that withstood the test of time and circumstance. When I first met them, they had been married over sixty years and I remember marveling at how much they still seemed to care for each other. *The Notebook* attempts to describe such a love. That said, *The Notebook* is a novel, not a memoir. Many changes were made regarding their story, in order to make the novel more universal, while staying committed to my original intent.

(nicholassparks.com)

While Sparks never states explicitly that his wife's grandparents dealt with Alzheimer's disease as was the case with Allie in *The Notebook*, a sixty plus year marriage still full of love and appreciation is certainly something worth documenting. One only has to turn on the news for a few moments to be confronted by stories of violence and death and the truly amazing feats such as the love between two people get lost in the chaos of daily life. Sparks has an ability to slow down time with his narratives, he takes readers into a world that could exist in the real world and

provides readers with hope and direction to try and make it so that the realistic fictitious world becomes a reality.

His second novel, *Message in a Bottle*, is set in Wilmington, North Carolina, a coastal community of approximately 100,000 people. Sparks who is very fluent in North Carolinian geography took this into consideration when deciding upon names for his primary male character, Garrett Blake. Sparks discusses the discussion process on his website, “Garrett's name was chosen with care, because Theresa had to be able to find him in a city the size of Wilmington (100,000) based on limited knowledge. The name couldn't be too common, or too strange. ‘Garrett’ seemed to fit the bill” (nicholassparks.com). A commonly heard cliché in creative writing circles is that, “In order to write a good story a writer must be very knowledgeable in the subject he or she is writing about.” Certainly Nicholas Sparks exemplifies this cliché, and before evidence that shows the contrary is offered, there are a number of examples that validate the above quotation. In *Message in a Bottle*, Theresa Osborne’s character is named after Nicholas’s agent Theresa Park, Theresa Osborne’s boss Deanna was named for a friend who wanted her name to appear in one of Nicholas’s novels, and Garrett’s widow is named after Sparks’s wife Catherine. In the case of this particular novel, Sparks makes no admission that any specific characteristics of his characters come from the namesakes they have been given. On the other hand, Sparks’s fourth novel, *The Rescue* was a direct representation of someone specific from his own life, his son Ryan. Just as Taylor McAden spent numerous hours willing Denise’s son Kyle to speak, Nicholas Sparks himself went through the same arduous, daily, multi-hour process with his son Ryan. In *The Rescue*, Sparks probably comes closest to writing in the events of his own life verbatim. Yet there still is a separation between fiction and memoir. It is this separation that allows the insertion of character’s names that exist within his

life without writing explicitly about them. The same holds true in his two most recent novels, *True Believer* and *At First Sight*. The primary female character Sparks admits, “was modeled after my wife,” and in the sequel Sparks’s family plays an equally influential role, “Lexie’s character is modeled after Cat’s (my wife), and her pregnancy was modeled after Cat’s as well. Jeremy, in some ways, was similar to my brother; in other ways, he’s similar to me. But there was no specific family member who inspired the story” (nicholassparks.com). For some of his novels this proposition is not so true. Sparks’s third novel, *A Walk to Remember* was written for and in certain ways about his younger sister Dana. Sparks discusses his inspiration for this novel saying:

A Walk to Remember was inspired by my sister. In many ways, Jamie Sullivan was my younger sister. Like Jamie, my sister was sweet. Like Jamie, my sister had tremendously strong faith. Like Jamie, my sister loved church. Like Jamie, my sister wasn’t popular at school. Like Jamie, my sister was always cheerful. Like Jamie, all my sister wanted in life was to get married.

And like Jamie, my sister got cancer. Like Jamie, my sister met someone. And like Landon, there was a long period of time when this fellow couldn’t imagine himself marrying a girl like her. And yet, in the end, he couldn’t help himself. Even when he knew she was sick, even when he knew that she might not make it, this man asked my sister to marry him. It was just about the sweetest thing that’s ever been done for anyone, and I suppose I wrote this novel not only so that you could get to know my sister, but so that you would know what a wonderful thing it was that her husband once did for her.

Nicholas Sparks is clearly influenced by the people that surround him in his life, but more specifically, Sparks seems to be more moved by the feats these individuals accomplish in their lives. By telling stories influenced by real people, about the actions of normal people, readers can believe that they too can either find someone great like, Dana's husband, or they can be that type of person in their everyday life. It is this quality that gives Sparks's novels their tremendous acclaim.

In his sixth novel, *Nights at Rodanthe*, Sparks tells a love at first sight tale that is relatively analogous to his own initial encounter with his wife Catherine. In a speech given in Fayetteville, North Carolina in 2002, Sparks discussed the seemingly impractical love found in *Nights at Rodanthe* stating, "In other words, for those of you who don't believe that love can blossom as quickly as it did for Paul and Adrienne, I just want you to know that it can, and it's as real as love that takes years to form. And if you don't believe love can grow stronger, even if you're not together? It did for us, and my wife and I have been married since 1989" (nicholassparks.com). Sparks also notes that the names for his characters in his sixth novel are the names of his in-laws. In its totality, *Nights at Rodanthe* is a Sparks family affair. Extended family or otherwise, *Nights at Rodanthe* represents the union of Nicholas and Catherine Sparks as well as paying tribute to the parents who brought Nicholas's wife into the world. Sparks is able to capture the sentimentality he feels for the successes in his own life without breaching on the genre of memoir or stepping into the weak writing of melodrama. Since Sparks intentionally places a lot of his own life into the novels that he writes his novels receive even more appeal. Not only are the plots universally applicable to the common man or woman, but since he writes with such intimacy, readers are that much more endeared to him as a person, which in turn makes him that much more respected as an author. One could make the argument that Sparks

should not exist among the great experimentalist writers such as Faulkner or Hemingway, but he should be revered for his accessibility and his capability to evoke particular emotional responses from his readers. In writing *A Bend in the Road* Sparks admits, “It was also the only novel that made me cry while writing” (nicholassparks.com). When the author is overcome with emotion over the very world he is creating, it is not surprising that many of his readers have the same emotional response.

To say that Nicholas Sparks is well-read seems a bit of an understatement. Over the same period of time that he was crafting all of his novels to date, he also managed to read at least one hundred books per year (nicholassparks.com). His extensive reading allows him to not only have a familiarity in the genre he is engaged in, but also to dabble in other genres to help him shape different types of characters so that his novels will not become formulaic. In arguably his most thrilling novel, *The Guardian*, Sparks creates a very dark character unlike any other that has been seen before or since this novel. Richard Franklin, as has been discussed multiple times already in this document, stalks Julie Barenson and ultimately threatens her life as well as those closest to her. When asked on his website if creating such a “dark” character was difficult for him, considering that so many of his other characters possess such positive traits, Nicholas responded:

Creating frightening attributes in a character isn’t challenging; the challenge lies in trying to make such a character original. There have been so many “dark” characters on television, in movies, and in other novels that it seems almost impossible to come up with something original, unless it’s incredibly far removed from reality. A person such as Hannibal Lecter falls into that category. But I wanted a frightening character that was both original and believable. To do

this, I created an obsessive character (not too original, I'll admit), but that I made him obsessive almost immediately (original). Most stories that deal with obsession are centered around longer relationships – this story did just the opposite. This immediate obsession, to me, is very frightening – imagine going on one or two dates with a person, only to have them believe you can never leave them. It would be like a nightmare, albeit one that could happen all too easily.

(nicholassparks.com)

Sparks's reference to Hannibal Lecter is an important not only for readers to understand but also for understanding Sparks's sentiments about particular characters. Within gothic literature circles, the frightening characteristics of a character like Hannibal Lecter are the fact that he is a human and yet he is such a monstrous individual. For Nicholas Sparks he feels that a character like Hannibal Lecter with all of his neuroses is 'incredibly far removed from reality.' The difference allows readers to understand that Sparks attempts to create characters, dark or otherwise, that capitalize on their most innate characteristics. Richard Franklin is an overly obsessive character has the capability of coming across extremely normal in social situations. There is nothing about Hannibal Lecter's character that signifies his normalness other than the fact he has a beating heart, a brain, and is covered by skin. Nicholas Sparks extrapolates his ideas of character from many different sources, but with each he goes through a process of deconstruction so that each character he creates represents a balance and believability that must be found in love stories.

V. Final Thoughts: The Challenges of Being a Male Author that Writes Love Stories

Writing about love is like writing about Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs), so many people swear they exist, but unless you've been abducted by them and can prove it, no one believes you. Love has the same ethereal quality. Most people believe that it exists but trying to define it, describe it, and write about it seems as difficult finding it. For this reason, the task Sparks engages in with each of his novels is a noble accomplishment in itself. As previous sections of this document have noted, the creative process for Sparks is far from easy. For starters writing realistic fiction is difficult enough. This is not to say that sci-fi and horror genres are easier to write, but when the imagination is bound by the constraints of reality and status quo believability there are a few more roadblocks set up for those that dabble in realistic fiction. In Sparks novels there are no potions or magic spells, the only supernatural implications are those of a Christian God, and outside of Him everything is left up to human agency. Certainly one could argue that writing about God is no less imaginative than writing about aliens from outer space, but popularly, readers will be more willing to believe in Christian miracles than alien brainwashing.

The point here is not to detract from these other equally relevant and scholarly genres, but to make a point about the different brand of creativity that a writer like Nicholas Sparks must require. To try and replicate any human emotions on the printed page is far from easy, then consider that his primary focus is to create love in ordinary life within the span of each of his novels. At its most basic level taking a single mother who waitresses and a lonely bachelor who is a firefighter does not seem all that exciting, yet by the end of *The Rescue* readers are led to believe that there is not a more perfect match. Even in stories where "miracles" occur, like the

conception of babies to parents that have been deemed infertile, even this astounding feat is made believable to readers which is what makes the accomplishment of writing about such an act that much more significant. Other genres require a fantastical mindset, with a Sparks novel, and the love story genre more generally readers are only required to have pondered about love. This last statute is an important one because it does not insinuate that the reader must believe in the idea of love or even that it exists. Even those who are skeptical still can find joy from the pages of Sparks's novels, because outside of the primary thrust of finding true love, each tale encapsulates life in a very visual, vivid form entertains practically any reader.

Not only has Sparks chosen a difficult topic to write about, but he also complicates the task by writing from varying gendered perspectives. He does not uniformly write from the male of view. In his novels, he has ventured through internal narratives from both genders as well as all different ages from child to senior citizen. This discussion is the equally significant counterpoint to the section mentioned earlier about writing about what you know. Nicholas Sparks has never been a woman, nor has he been a grandparent, yet he is able to tackle these and others successfully. When asked on his website if it is difficult for him to write for female characters he responds:

I suppose it comes down to the fact that the women in my life have always been important and I've respected them not only as women, but as individuals. They have been wonderful role models for me. I had a wonderful mother, I married a fantastic lady, and both my agent and editor are female. I suppose I've learned from them. (nicholassparks.com)

His response is not only humble, but it furthers the argument about his inspirations for writing coming from his own life. Since he cannot literally experience being female he must derive his

inspiration from those females closest to him. In some ways, writing from a feminine point of view offers fewer challenges because as a male, Sparks can project attributes onto the female characters he is creating. Sparks can consider what type of woman he would want within the context of his own life, namely his wife Catherine, and then derive characteristics off of his own interests. A general description for most of his female characters is a woman with blonde hair, blue eyes varying in darkness, a plain sense of style, and a shapely yet not overly voluptuous figure. Not surprisingly, his wife in pictures seems to have many of the same characteristics.

Outside of writing about women, Sparks has also tackled the roles of playing child and senior citizen. In *A Bend in the Road*, Jonah Ryan periodically offers innocent queries about his father's new interest in his teacher. Jonah is an incredibly innocent character and yet he offers some of the more moving and poignant comments within the flow of the story. Sparks has five children of varying ages from which he can find inspiration for the little quips Jonah offers throughout the novel. In *The Notebook*, Sparks also was faced with the challenge of writing from the perspective of teenagers in the characters Noah and Allie. As the story progressed he also was presented the challenge of writing from their points of view as they drifted into old age. Furthermore, Sparks decided to have Allie's character receive the diagnosis that she had Alzheimer's disease. Not only is Allie a woman, she is elderly, and she has Alzheimer's and yet, she still is one of the most popular Sparks characters because of her endearing nature and the conviction she had to follow her heart. When asked about the difficulty of writing for characters outside of his current age bracket Sparks said, "I tend to assume that most people -- male or female, young or old -- have largely the same types of thoughts. However, the difference lies in their perspectives. So I try to put myself in their shoes and see the world the way they do" (nicholassparks.com). His last statement is probably the most valuable about who he is as a

person as well as a writer. The level of intimacy he has with his characters is what makes them so realistic and memorable. Whether he is writing about a mid-thirty year old male or an eighty-five year old woman, neither comes from the portion of the brain where commonplace thoughts exist. He instead must step outside of what he knows and ask questions of the people he hopes to create, and through this mental dialogue he has with himself, he ultimately comes across as though each of his characters has been successfully created out what he knows, rather than simply out of his imagination. The idea that a writer is most successful when he or she is writing about the things they know best, is not entire true. In fact, it seems more reputable to be able to create a character or story from a place outside what is well-known, because if the reader then accepts it as true the author has achieved something truly special. This is the case in *Nights in Rodanthe* where Paul Flanner ventures to help his estranged son who is a doctor down there. The reader goes to South America right along with the lead character and there is no question as to the validity of the storyline. Sparks represents a balance between the known and the unknown, what he has experienced and what he would like to experience. In one breath, he predominantly writes about cities and towns found across his long time home of North Carolina. In the next, he writes about characters that exist outside of his life experiences, and puts them in places he has spent little or no time at all.

As difficult as the writing process is for Nicholas Sparks, his sex, along with his ability to accurately represent and tell stories seen as endearing to the opposite sex, make him a perennial threat on the bestseller's lists. The appeal of a male author in a female dominated purchasing public is huge. Just like the topics of the novels themselves, Sparks as a person represents the hope of female readers everywhere. Sparks is a fairly attractive, intelligent, family-centered, provider for his family, which for most women would be seen as the ideal man. For this reason,

along with readers' very intimate relationship to Sparks as a person, he has a large following. Not only is Sparks's writing reputable but the fact he is male is seen as capital for publishers and bookstores alike. Male authors will be given prime placement in bookstores because their masculinity is endearing to a predominant female clientele. In a October 2000 article in the *New York Times*, staff writer Martin Arnold explains the reasoning for this form of promotion, "The justification for this from publishers is that women are the greatest book buyers; the theory, then, is that women want to find out how men really think about relationships and reading love stories written by men is one way to do that" (E3). The scheme is pretty basic but it seems to have great success considering that every Nicholas Sparks novel has spent some time at or around the top of the New York Times Bestseller chart. Topically the love story genre has a lot of appeal given its subject area, but this appeal becomes amplified when readers have this discussion on love with a male author. Typically the scenario calls for a female reader that wants to believe, as the above quote mentions, that there are emotionally present males in this world who are able to at least write about the importance of love in relationships. For male readers, even though the genre is not statistically as successful, males still make their way to the shelves to read love stories because for them they act as a catalyzing force to try and understand the women that surround. This make sense because if the genre is so popular amongst females then it would follow that if men are interested in understanding at the level of prose what women want then they can find it in this female centric genre. These novels do not stand in for self-help books, but they do provide readers with a scope to look upon their own relationships and consider whether or not romance is really present at least in the popular form found on the pages of stories about love.

The love stories that Nicholas Sparks writes exist as a subgenre within the larger title of romantic literature. Within this kind of fiction there are a few subgenres that play off of each

other in different ways. Sparks tops bestseller's lists along side romance novel writer like Danielle Steel and LaVyrle Spencer. Authors such as Anne Rice have ventured into another spin off of romantic literature which is the erotic novel. Many writers dabble in this particular subgenre as an escape from the less risqué fiction forms. The erotic novel is less of a concern in my thesis on Nicholas Sparks because it is further removed from comparison than harlequin romances and love stories. Understanding the differentiation between these two extremely popular subgenres can be defined by the division between terms such as "romantic" and "sexual." While these terms overlap to a certain degree, love stories are much more concerned with perpetuating what is considered romantic, while harlequin romances make their millions of off perpetuating gendered stereotypes of dominance and passivity, but doing so in such a way that they are made beautiful and sensual to the minds of those who read them. In an essay written by Carol Ricker-Wilson entitled, "Breaking Textual Bodices: Gender, Reading, and the Popular Romance," Ricker-Wilson notes how many students within her urban high school English class were captivated, in every sense of the word, by Danielle Steel's romance novels. Many of Ricker-Wilson's quotations in her essay show her students' frustration with the romance genre's perpetuation of stereotypes of gendered servitude on the part of females. In harlequin romances, men are tamed or women are won, but rarely is there a mutual progression towards romance, and the path taken to romance is one documented by overtly sexual terms. While love stories read at a PG-13 level and may stretch up towards R-rating, romance novels, while containing romantic qualities, exist solely at the rated R level if not above it. Characters have sexual fantasies about other characters instead of less graphic versions of arousal like quickened breath and body tingling found in love stories. At the end of LaVyrle Spencer's novel, *Hummingbird* (1983), Abigail McKenzie is about to have sex with her bad boy turned

good lover, Jesse DuFrayne. The choice to define this couple's physical act as "having sex" rather than "making love" as is found in love stories is blatant because the physical nature of romance novels is not dealt with as cautiously. Sexualized images in romance novels are much more grungy and fragmented than the smooth, soft images of love stories. When Abigail is asked by Jesse, "'What's first? A bath, dinner, champagne...or me?'" Abigail responds, "Well how about all four at once?" (404). The difference in language between any quotation referenced from Sparks and this quotation is striking. The image given here is very explicit, imaginative elements are replaced by outright statement of intent. To make an argument that one subgenre is more popular than the other would be nearly impossible, but it is worth noting that in 1999 over 48% of mass market paperbacks in print were popular romances, of which Sparks would be included (Ricker-Wilson 57). But the differences between the two genres at a syntactical level are worth noting because they represent demographic differences in the people who buy them.

Within the love story genre there are many other significant players who battle Sparks for top billing. Among them are authors like James Patterson, Anita Shreve, James Albom, and Nicole Krauss. Anita Shreve, like Nicholas Sparks, has touched the top fiction ranks making New York Times Bestseller's list, being part of Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, and also has an affluent writing career with published works in the dozens. For specific comparison, Shreve's novel, *The Last Time They Met* (2002), has many structural as well as topical comparisons to the works of Nicholas Sparks. Shreve also has a definitively different writing style than Sparks even though they exist within the love story subgenre. Among the consistencies between the two is that Shreve would agree with Sparks's contention that "Love stories have to have a tragedy" (Arnold E3). In *The Last Time They Met*, Shreve experiments with narrative structure. Many

contemporary novels move linearly with the only variances being temporary flashbacks. Shreve's novel catalogues three separate times frame where the two primary characters meet one another. Not only is the story fragmented until its conclusion, but it is also written in reverse. The readers first meet the two characters when they are fifty-two, the second at age twenty-six, and the third is at age seventeen, which in actuality is the characters' first meeting within the context of their own lives. Each section of their life puts them in different social situations as well as entirely different geographic locations. The story ends with readers acquiring the knowledge that the pursuer, Thomas, takes his own life because he can no longer bear the weight of being without his true love that he has lost on three separate occasions. Also comparable to Sparks, religious implications are prevalent in the narrative. For example, Linda, the woman being pursued by Thomas, is given the name Magdalene in honor of the troubled life of Mary Magdalene. There are also Christian moments concerning adultery, something Sparks refuses adamantly to write about, and life after death, which Sparks is always centered on given his Catholic faith. Shreve's writing style is slightly more edgy and adventuresome than Sparks's feel-good version of love. The emotional rollercoaster ride Shreve puts the reader on is just as drastic as Sparks's enthusiasts, but their writing is slightly different. For example, Shreve is more willing to deal with drugs, violence, suicide, and adultery within the context of her love stories, while Sparks's most expansionary moves are found in *The Guardian* with its near thriller style.

Even in their differences, every author's goal within the romantic literature genre is to exemplify in their fiction what life could be like. Whether it is the graphic sexuality found in romance novels or the sensitivity found in love stories, each accurately represents characteristics found in life. While it cannot be said that the events of a Sparks novel have ever happened

definitively or will ever happen, their believability and resonance from his life makes them that much more potentially tangible. On Nicholas Sparks's website, on the topic of characters dying at the end of some of his novels, he responds, "If there's no great love, there's no great loss. I read that somewhere and it's guided me throughout each of my novels" (FAQs *Nights at Rodanthe*). This maxim not only pervades from the pages of Sparks's literature but it is one that in many ways represents his own life. Most generally, his comment represents the sentiments of many readers, if not he would not be so successful. To have success like Nicholas Sparks a multitude of characteristics, both literary and experiential, must congeal so that the line between the writer's life and his or her works blurs significantly. Writing about life only becomes amplified by one's imagination, and for Nicholas Sparks the union between the two is felt in every carefully chosen word. Readers feel the love and loss of that love that the characters as well as Sparks feel with the turn of each page. Everyone wants to find love, and in the novels of Nicholas Sparks, readers live vicariously through the experiences of characters that represent the author's own journey through life, and the battles fought in trying to acquire the ultimate goal of true love and life long happiness.

VI. Creative Application of Analyzing Sparks's Writing

Trip to Fall

Finding love is a lot like folding socks. Each sock is a part of a pair, but whether it's the trip from the laundry room or the crevices in the dryer, making the union a reality never comes easy. At age twenty-one Sarah Raymond made a decision, everyday was going to be mismatch sock day, it just became too much trouble to take the time to try and find that perfect pair. So

every morning for the last six years two different socks found their ways to Sarah's feet, and like the awkwardness of purple walking right next to lime green, men of all different types walked right in and out of Sarah's life.

"So, yeah I guess I'll see you around. I'll give you a call or something." Bret was the kind of guy that never really knew what to say and when the right time was to say it.

After closing the door to her apartment, Sarah knew Bret wasn't going to call, not that she really cared all that much. Other than his exit, Bret had seemed so self-assured all night long, and frankly her patience with his long winded stories about his accomplishments had made her so tense with frustration that her neck was actually sore.

Sarah hadn't always been this cynical about love; she can say honestly that she thought she had been in love once. His name was Jeremy, and he was everything she thought she wanted...she was wrong.

Sarah first met Jeremy her junior year of college. He was shorter than her by a significant amount, standing a thimble's height above five feet tall, but his broad shoulders and high cheek bones gave him the swagger of a giant. After sitting through the fall semester of an introductory government class, Sarah finally found the confidence to talk to him at an end of semester party. What started with casual chatter ultimately led the two back to his dormitory for a movie and some late night conversation. Whenever the laughter broke, Jeremy would find ways to touch Sarah affectionately as if to tell her that she was not the only one who missed out on class notes to gaze adoringly across the seminar room at someone else.

The holiday season that year was a strange but lovely one for Sarah. Each day she woke up with a sense of vigor knowing that the timetable for her day would be documented by the moments when she was able to speak to Jeremy on the phone. Every moment she shared with

him talking across borders made her feel as if the gap between Georgia and New Mexico was not quite so cavernous. When she was not on the phone she was busying herself with hypothetical situations: what life would be like if Jeremy were someone she could date, what it would be like to have him as a steady boyfriend, what it would be like to...marry him? Strangely enough, she'd considered this final thought too. She'd spent one evening with the guy and the most she knew about him was that he loved the color blue, and he despised vegetables.

For Jeremy, the sentiment was not all that different initially from Sarah's perspective. He had caught her several times looking his way in government class, and it pleased him to see someone taking interest. For him though, her gazes merely represented desperation, someone looking for anyone to offer compassion, little did he know the depth of her emotion. He mentally made notes all semester as to her habits. She always would twirl her pencil between each finger before putting it behind her right ear whenever she was nervous. If she was ever bored, she would ceaselessly tap her feet on the floor as if to give the impression she was riding a horse. And if he ever caught her staring his way, she would quickly glance downward but when her face came up from the desk materials she pretended she was looking at, he could feel the warmth the smile on her face offered as it lit up the entire room.

The night they shared together before the holiday break was something neither of them expected to enjoy quite so much. Jeremy had always considered himself a one-hit wonder so to speak. He would find a way to fill the void he needed filled and then he'd start the next morning a new man looking for his next companion. Never was it the same girl, never did he feel the same way, what he was certain of, whether it was her naivety in believing he really was interested in her, or he was just getting soft after years of one-night stands, he found their evening snuggled up together somewhat endearing. The next day he realized he did not want to

move on, he wanted to stay close to Sarah, so before he started the drive home to Atlanta, he spent an hour longer than anticipated just watching her pack her things before heading home to Santa Fe. Once at home the phone started ringing, this caught him a little off guard, and frankly it did not really sit right with him, but he decided to play along.

He kept the conversations as short as possible and they primarily focused on her, *Don't let her get too attached*, he would think, but his aloofness only added to his appeal. She practically salivated at the thought of breaking him down and learning his every nuance. Jeremy, who had dedicated his life to being a heartbreaker disguised as a hopeless romantic never lost control of his front, and existed just outside of Sarah's understanding. As the New Year and second semester approached, each believed they had a firm grip on their new found relationship. The problem was, while Sarah was falling in love; Jeremy was boosting his ego at the expense of her emotions.

"I know its only been an hour since I last talked to you," she began, "but whenever I'm not talking to you I feel so bored."

"I know what you mean baby. *Baby...that was a good one*, he thought, *that'll make her swoon a bit*. I feel like we've been apart for days since I last talked to you, not a matter of minutes."

"Oh Jer-Bear, you are so wonderful," the nickname just came to her, it seemed sweet and yet still somewhat masculine.

"You're not so bad yourself," he mused.

Once second semester finally rolled around each believed they knew each other like they knew their favorite book, which is odd considering Sarah still knew very little outside of Jeremy's color preference and his disdain towards healthy food. Jeremy on the other hand had

come to the culmination of his studies over Sarah, and he was getting to the end of his leash as far as tolerating the daily grind of their long distance relationship. After creatively causing her heart to skip a beat multiple times over the holiday season, seeing her face to face again would create new standards, new expectations, none of which were ever planning to be filled by his watch, but Sarah continued deeper into the relationship with her infatuation causing her to be totally unaware.

“Hey Jeremy, it is so great to see you again finally,” she began. “Talking to you was awesome over the holidays but it was somewhat unfulfilling, because all I wanted to do was get to hold you like we did before the end of the semester.”

Jeremy never missed a step and his head remained focused forward. Even the animalistic ear twitch that represents the knowledge of hearing your name uttered by someone else, that never happened either. Jeremy seemed utterly oblivious to his name as if he were deaf or diseased. Sarah stood deflated and confused as she continued to plea for nothing more than simple acknowledgement. She was watching a young man who she had poured her heart out to for the past few weeks walk right by her as if she had never existed.

Questions rushed through her head like sprinters racing to the finish line. What happened, where had her romantic new love interest gone? She felt so vulnerable, as if she had walked out into public and had forgotten to put on clothes. Why had she allowed herself to be so open with someone she hardly knew? She’d never allowed herself to be precocious with any man in her life, not even her own father knew of some of the events of her life that she had shared with Jeremy. She had never felt so confused, nor had she ever felt so betrayed, but she knew she deserved an explanation. It came unsurprisingly in the form of a phone call.

“Hey Sarah, how’s it going?”

“You have a lot of nerve Jeremy. How can you even pretend to be chipper with me after how you acted yesterday?”

“Relationships are a lot of work you know Sarah, it’s not always heavenly and magical. I just wanted to test you to see how you’d respond. Just so you know you acted exactly how I anticipated you would...poorly.”

As her face became flushed with anguish, her breathing quickened and her patience depleted rapidly. “How can you be so two-faced? I thought I had found something special in you and now I feel like I’ve just been fooled by some childish trick.”

How right she was, but she would not be given the satisfaction of calling his bluff, “It is you who is the child Sarah, for believing all the sweet nothings I spoke to you. I could practically feel you melting through the phone line, it was borderline pathetic.”

“All I’ve ever wanted is to be happy, and I thought I had found it in you.” Her voice was cracking with desperation, she was trying so valiantly to remain composed, but Jeremy pushed her back with one final blow.

“You’ll never be happy, not until you get over your candy-coated, fairy tale existence. Have a nice life Sarah and you don’t have to thank me for helping you become a better person. You were going to have to learn someday that the world is a sick and scary place; I just gave you a crash course. Have a great day.” The phone clicked and all that remained was Sarah with the receiver still cradling her cheek, astonished by the last five minutes. The world really is a messed up place.

“Happy Birthday to me, I’m going to the mall.” Shopping was Sarah’s version of therapy. Athletes often make their way to a sports psychologist when their life becomes too

stressful for them. For Sarah, therapy came in the form of jacket shopping. It did not matter if it was cold or not outside; every season was fair game for a new coat. All styles intrigued her, some served an explicit purpose, others did not, but each had its own importance in Sarah's life, and with no companion to tell her otherwise, impulse buying was certainly never out of the question.

Once inside a store, Sarah closed her eyes and took a deep breath like she was about to take a refreshing plunge into cool water. A saleswoman who had helped Sarah before on one of her shopping adventures approached with a smile, "How are you doing today miss?"

"I'm doing well thanks. I'm just browsing, but if I need anything I'll be sure to ask you," she paused to look at the girl's nameplate, "Michelle."

As Sarah made her way to the back of the store a beige winter coat with imitation fur around the neckline caught her attention. Right along side her next purchase stood a teenage boy who nonchalantly seemed to be perusing the racks of clothing. Sarah had no time to pay attention to some random teenager, she was on a mission and there would be no distracting her from her objective. As Sarah was reaching for the jacket that had caught her attention, the boy had moved his position so that he stood right behind the outstretched arm of Sarah. In one quick movement he managed to swipe her purse that had been dangling loosely around her elbow, and began running for the exit.

"Hey, give me back my purse! Someone stop that boy, he's just stolen my purse...Stop him please!"

Just as panic began to set in, fate literally stepped in the way of the boy's success. A man who had dropped his cellular phone accidentally stuck his foot up in the air while bending over to retrieve it. His foot caught the boy's leg and sent him flying right into the glass storefront,

when the boy hit he bounced back like a ping-pong ball, except when he hit the floor there was no bounce, just blackness.

Sarah rushed over to where the boy lay dazed and confused as to how he had wound up crumpled up against the glass storefront. The man who had accidentally saved the day was about to apologize to the boy once he realized he was carrying a purse. He made a quick snap judgment that the purse did not actually belong to the boy, this became a fact once Sarah came rushing up uttering only the words, “Serves him right, trying to steal someone’s purse. Hopefully that cut on your forehead will leave a scar so you can remember your poor decision-making for awhile.”

The accidental hero bent down and retrieved the purse that lay next to boy on the floor and offered it to Sarah. This was really the first moment that Matt Stephens looked square into the eyes of Sarah Raymond.

“Here’s your purse, hopefully nothing fell out or anything.” Matt swallowed hard after he spoke to try and find some saliva in his suddenly dry throat.

“Thank you so much for stopping that guy. I don’t know what I would’ve done if he’d gotten away with my purse. I don’t have much, but I carry my whole life in that thing.” *My hero*, she thought, *he’s even playing the whole situation off like it was no big deal, that’s sweet.*

“Well anyway, hopefully your day is a little less like an action flick from here on out.” That was all Matt could muster up, and he said it with his eyes looking at her feet, because he’d suddenly become overwhelmed by her gaping blue eyes. *That’s the best you can do buddy*, he thought to himself, *whether you meant to or not you had the luck of saving this woman’s purse from being stolen, that’s worth more than a corny comment.* When she did not respond with anything more than a smile to his witty jab, he decided to be a bit more boisterous. “If you want,

since you've just been through some light trauma, would you like me to walk you to your car once you're done with your shopping adventure." He added a wink to try and keep the mood light without coming across creepy.

"No thanks," she replied. As a look of momentary disappointment cracked his face she added, "But you can walk me to the Food Court, I'm starving."

"Sounds great," he responded with a smile.

After exchanging their names, the two shared a small table where they each enjoyed a slice of pizza and a Coke. Both were relatively comfortable initially because they focused on the events of the last few minutes, both continually commenting on their disbelief about every part of the near robbery. "I can't believe that boy tried to steal my purse...I can't believe I didn't see it coming at all...I can't believe you stopped him with that timely swipe of your leg. That was a great move."

There were a few things Matt knew for sure about his life. First of all, he hardly ever was at the mall. Secondly, he knew he should have worn cologne this morning, but he had not counted on having lunch with anyone. Lastly, while looking across the table at Sarah, he realized he had never seen such a beautiful person in his entire life. She was not appealing because she possessed a supermodel body, nor did she dress like the women of magazine covers, but she was easily the most intriguing woman he had ever seen. Her eyes glistened in a way that even when overhead lights hit them they shined like fresh snow on a sunny day. Her blonde hair flowed down toward her lower back and hung wavy and loose as though nature had been the hairdresser for the day, and the straightening iron had taken the day off. Small amounts of blush accentuated her cheeks and light pink lipstick brought out the fullness of her supple lips. When she spoke, every word flowed from her mouth like melodious notes from a symphony; no matter

the topic it was impossible to ignore her. Everything about her seemed so unplanned, like she just got out of and put on the clothes with the closest proximity to her bed, and yet her aura was one of quiet confidence. Every motion she made gave off the persona that she knew she was in control of her life, and for that reason, Matt's last discovery confused him a bit.

When his napkin slid off the table onto the tile floor, he bent under the table to pick it up and he noticed climbing out of Sarah's shoes were two different socks. Each reached right around her ankle bone, they just barely peeked out of her Asics running shoes, but there they were, one pink and the other purple. Matt made a mental note but decided not to ask about it, and instead continued on with the conversation they had started about what they did with their leisure time.

Matt Stephens and Sarah Raymond are a couple. After waiting a day with Sarah's number on his bureau, he could not wait any longer and gave her a call. From the moment she answered with her bright "hello" he knew that luck had led him to someone special. After a few months of lunch or dinner dates, while at their favorite Mexican restaurant, Matt decided to ask Sarah an important question.

"Sarah," he waited for her to swallow her fajitas, "I was wondering how you felt about moving in with me. I know my apartment is small, but I know we can rearrange some things so that it is comfortable for both of us."

As Matt waited patiently for her reply, Sarah couldn't help but think about how handsome he looked sitting across the table from her. He had a look of concern that he had crossed some sort of unspoken hidden boundary with his question and he shifted uneasily. Matt's sea blue eyes glowed in the mood lighting, and no matter what he did to try and calm

himself he never took his eyes off of her. That was what she loved most, a man who made sure to make every connection possible to the woman he was speaking to. He had an amazing body, and it would be a lie to say he was difficult to look at, but what gave him the total package was the fact that he really knew how to treat a woman. He smiled cautiously to try and lighten the mood and his dimples brought his face to life.

Sarah was ready to take Matt out of his agony and calmly replied, "I'll move in...on one condition."

"What's that," he asked anxiously.

"You have to promise that you'll never hurt me."

Sarah's comment perplexed him a bit. They'd been together for almost a year, sharing late nights holding each other on the couch, or resting peacefully in each other's arms in bed, and never had he thought there was any reason to question the emotional strength of their relationship. Did she think that he was a heartbreaker; did she think he was trying to pull off some scam by asking her to move in, did she think he'd start taking her valuables? As erroneous as the questions sounded he did not know what to think about her proposition.

Before he was able to ask any of these questions she continued, "This is just a big step and I don't want it to turn out to be a mistake. I care about you an awful lot Matt, but I'm not willing to get hurt again."

In the months they'd shared together they had learned each other's life story, which included Sarah's refusal to wear matching socks. While at the time, Matt thought her explanation was a little over the top, after further review he understood her reasoning. Being dumped is an experience no one enjoys, but when it's as humiliating as her situation in college had been, that leaves a scar that never disappears.

Over this same period of time Sarah discovered some of her own interesting nuances in the life of her beau Matthew Braden Stephens. One of the first nights she stayed at Matt's apartment she saw a blanket that was draped over the recliner in the living room. Certainly a blanket draped over a chair isn't all that intriguing, but when it's a blanket that is frayed on the edges and small holes in areas, it sends up some flags. Clearly it has no purpose as far as adding to the décor, so Sarah assumed there must have been some sort of sentimental value attached to the relic. In one of the only arguments the couple had had in their months together, Matt explained that the blanket had been sewn as a gift by his childhood sweetheart Heather Hopper. When Sarah pressed as to why he still had it, Matt immediately went on the defensive.

"She was my first love, and that blanket is a symbol of that, ok?"

"Well that was really nice of her, but you aren't still in love with her are you, so why keep the blanket, or more importantly, why have it out in the open so inquisitive people like me will question about it?"

"Look, it's been a part of my life for what seems like forever, so you're just going to have to deal with it, cause I'm not moving it or getting rid of it."

"Fair enough, I just hope you can find it in yourself to one day care for me as much as you care for that blanket."

"Whatever." He walked away annoyed, but he realized she'd been right. There was no way he could ever expect to keep a woman like Sarah happy without putting her ahead of all the skeletons from his earlier life.

"Hey sweetheart, dinner is almost ready. Do you think you could give me a hand?"

“Be right there.” Sarah could not believe it, she and Matt had been together for two years, and she had never been happier. Matt had promised her a romantic evening around the house after their tiring days at work, and he was starting to deliver with a home cooked meal.

When Sarah stepped in the kitchen Matt was standing near the stove adding the final touches to his famous lasagna. She slowly walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around him. She could feel his heart quicken with her touch, and without even seeing his face she knew his dimples were showing to accent his grin. Without turning around he grabbed one of her hands and tenderly brought it to his mouth kissing it twice. This sent chills up and down Sarah’s body, never had she felt so cared for in her whole life. Although they’d only lived together for a short time, she knew she had made the right decision to start living with him. They balanced each other out like a scale, when one was acting negative the other would be so optimistic. Their relationship was so successful that when they went anywhere together people would stare at them simply to try and fathom how they had missed out on Sarah and Matt’s brand of happiness.

“I love you, Sarah. I just want you to know that.” Matt had set up his living room so that pillows acted as the chairs and the coffee table was covered with a maroon table cloth and finished off with a single candle standing tall in the middle of the table. Once the table was set, Matt walked toward the fireplace to start a fire.

“Sarah, I want you to see something.” She turned in his direction to find him holding his tattered old blanket as the fire roared to life. “My whole life I held onto a memory, because I was afraid to let it go. That time period and this blanket represents the last time I really believed in true love. I was so young, so naïve, but for me it was real. I promised myself I would hold onto that feeling until I knew I’d found someone who could take away the hurt and replace the

love I used to feel all those years ago. I realize now that the day has come, and its time for me to let go.”

With that, the blanket was tossed into the fire and was engulfed by the flames. After throwing the blanket in, Matt smiled in Sarah’s direction, and Sarah realized she’d never loved someone more. As the carefully prepared dinner remained on the table, Matt took Sarah in his arms and kissed her gently on the forehead.

Sarah smiled up at Matt as her chin rested on his strong chest, “Thank you for loving me so much. You’ve changed my life forever.”

Between the warmth resonating from the fire and the warmth running between their hearts, each was overcome with burning passion and slowly began to undress the other. Matt kissed every inch of Sarah’s body without rushing, allowing her to quiver under the touch of his lips. After examining each other for some time, they made their way to the sofa never releasing each other’s grasp. Sarah then began to affectionately nibble on Matt’s ear that immediately caused goose bumps over his entire body. The tension continued to build between the two of them, yet neither of them rushed, they wanted this night, like their love, to last forever. As they began to make love, Matt made a quick mental note. He saw on the floor where their clothes had been strewn were two white socks. He had worn black socks to match his slacks, so they must have been Sarah’s. With a smile he went back to focusing on his future. He thanked God every night for her introduction into his life. He knew she was the one. Hours after the food had gotten cold and the fire began to fade, the two lovers fell gracefully asleep.

Sarah could feel the sun shining on her body but she didn’t want to stir. While her body felt so warm she pinched her eyes shut because an intense light was being forced upon them. The window that caught the sun in Matt’s apartment was at her feet so she didn’t understand how

such an intense light could be hitting her in the face. Slowly she opened her eyes to find sitting in front of her a fully prepared breakfast tray. On the tray she found eggs, blueberry pancakes, milk, orange juice and the culprit for shining brightly in her eyes. As she reached for it, she couldn't believe how the light bounced off of it like a shiny disco ball, reflecting light in every direction. As Matt entered the room smiling wildly, she slid the ring on her finger and before he got out any of the words he had meant to say, Sarah said, "Yes, I have no problem with being the happiest woman in the world."

Sarah finally had someone to help her do her laundry and Matt found his new blanket to keep him warm. Neither one of them individually is perfect, but each is able to account for the other's flaws. As a partnership Matt Stephens and Sarah Raymond exemplify perfection, but more importantly they represent the joy between two people when they fall in love.

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