3653 Words

Sarah Estime

Fairfield County, CT

(203) 817-1025

sjestime@gmail.com

**APPEALS**

by

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**Pathos**

*“Inspiring an emotional response; acquiring feeling.”*

The morning chill swept through the open hangar doors past Cameron’s face, cooling the sunshine’s humidity off of his muscles. He wiped the corners of his mouth with his index finger and thumb and folded his arms, anchoring himself to try to center his attention on turnover. So-and-so was taking leave. This discrepancy was still holding them up. The solution was that. The group, a cluster of concealed faces chuckling at sarcastic banter, dispersed at the sound of, “Get to work.”

Grey intermingled with coyote brown lethargically strolled facing the forward aircraft, hugging the nose of the aircraft ten feet below. Bone white flooring revealed cement or otherwise streaks of dirt and oil. Faded tail logos displayed like a voyage collection hung onto its last bit of adhesive. Rusting tools clanking echoed throughout the hangar.

“Coffee?” Scott asked.

Cameron agreed not for the coffee but for the ride.

At the BX, Cameron browsed the chips aisle deep in thought about the ghastly sodium count. Perhaps in his thirties, he could have procrastinated admitting to himself that junk food wasn’t lethal. The only reason he knew that wasn’t true was due to the physical clarity he realized after eliminating Cool Ranch Doritos from his diet.

His attention was interrupted. A hesitant half-smile balancing big attentive eyes greeted him from around the corner.

“Hey Scott, it’s Clarke,” Cameron called.

“I saw him,” Clarke said. “I said hi.”

Scott announced another hello from the freezers.

“Oh alright. You said hi already. Alright,” Cameron said.

Clarke inched into closer proximity to Cameron to choose a family-size bag of Smartfood White Cheddar Popcorn. She stepped back into her place and then swiftly tipped-toed back into him to grab another bag. She back-stepped toward checkout.

“Your mask isn’t a chin mask—a chinstrap.”

Cameron grimaced, “What?”

“A chinstrap,” Clarke clarified. She looked at the floor and said, “Alright later.”

She tossed the bags into the window of her car and immediately started back to her office. Trophies and medals with no sense of interior design. A computer that required constant rebooting. She pulled her CAC card from its slot and trudged into her supervisor’s office.

“Sir, would you like me to do some COVID runs?”

“Good idea,” he said staring up at his portrait-fixed screen.

Clarke rushed out, taking the daily clipboard with her, nearly knocking the hand sanitizer off the podium. The atmosphere changed as she traversed toward the maintenance breakroom. Heavy smooth greys. A slab of cement that made a pleasing squeaking sound. A collection of colorful tail logos embodying the comfort of wanderlust. Tools rustling echoed throughout the hangar.

“Surprise COVID check, everyone!” Clarke said cheerily.

She looked for Cameron, disappointed that he in fact had his mask on. She then inspected everyone else and peeked into the office. Her stomach dropped at the thought of having no other reason to be there. She searched for anything, landing on the contents of the oak table. She scanned profanities etched with screwdrivers, Valentine’s Day cards for the taking, and finally a full bowl of chips.

“Those are good. Bare Baked beet chips?”

“You like those?” someone from across the room asked.

Clarke looked at Cameron. “Who brought these in?”

“Some USO-funded.. something,” Scott said.

Cameron grimaced. “They’re strung out on sodium anyway. Doesn’t matter.”

“I think it’s a fraction of the percentage,” Clarke answered.

Cameron fidgeted in thought and then relented.

“Have any of you tried it?” Clarke asked.

“We love it. Can’t you tell?” Scott smirked.

Clarke smiled. Scott lurched across the table to grab a piece. He unhooked one loop of his mask from his ear. The shop roared dramatics about his contribution to the spread of the virus.

“Well it doesn’t count if he’s eating,” Clarke chuckled.

Commentary about mask intangibility and mask design for straw drinking followed.

“No bite, Cameron?”

Cameron shook an upturned nose. Beet chips weren’t Clarke’s favorite snack either. The color was placenta red. The taste was earthy like it was still folded in dirt. The consistency disintegrated like stale popcorn. Worst was the fact that her mouth didn’t water with the chips in her mouth; in fact it dried.

“Just try a small bite,” Clarke urged.

He unhooked one ear of his mask and reached for one. And then he retracted, tugging on the one side of his mask to put it back on.

“Well you’ll have to eat it now or I’ll have to give you a demerit,” Clarke smiled, remembering she couldn’t be seen under her mask.

The shop bleated with laughter.

“You’re joking right?” Cameron asked, smiling with all of his teeth.

He thought about some alternatives. Surely, some constitution protected his right to change his mind. Perhaps he’d decide he didn’t like the touch; the smell if it got through his mask; the taste on his tongue. He questioned if he was expected to complete the full swallow. He questioned who would verify.

He reached for a chip and extended himself enough to touch one before being plopped back down by the weight of his uniform. The room groaned, disapproving of his blatant disregard for manual germ-spreading. He rolled his eyes.

“Put your mask back on!” someone from one of the offices shouted.

“I can’t,” he laughed. “I gotta eat this chip so I don’t get written up.”

With Scott studying the exact chip for Cameron, he coached Cameron on where to grab. In an attempt to reach again, Cameron touched another and everyone laughed. He glanced at Clarke smiling through her eyes. Finally, Cameron retrieved the two chips he touched and took a small bite into each. Crumbs littered the table. In one oblivious, cursory motion, he swept the mess to the floor. To his surprise, the taste was bereft of salt and he didn’t mind it. The color enlivened his mood for romance. The taste was rich with a robust grip of legume. The grains sat on his tongue and melted in his mouth like quinoa. No mouth-watering so no midnight thirst. He didn’t mind taking a bite into the two hundred-something milligrams of sodium at all.

He took a sip of water to clean his teeth—hydrating water, not retained water from sugar and salt; necessary water as opposed to water flushed from diuretics and dehydrants. He put his mask back on.

“Wait, if I were to just drink water, would you have gotten me off?”

The smile lines behind her mask widened.

“I would have gotten you off.” She glanced at Scott and then back to Cameron. “Yeah, no—yeah, you wouldn’t have gotten a demerit.”

He smiled back. Remembering that she couldn’t see him smiling, he laughed audibly. Infected, she laughed audibly in return.

**Ethos**

*“Establishing personal credentials; acquiring trust.”*

At the end of the week, Cameron stripped himself of his boots and uniform looking forward to the two-day release of laden, laborious work for the very luxury of relaxation. He felt the lightness. Embraced it. He listened to the white noise of the neighborhood—trucks rushing by, rocking the foundation of his house; an EMS truck howled down the main road. A prayer crossed his mind. And then the lumbering smog of the North and South Tower. Imminent warfare. Two years in egress—automatic; impersonal; impassable. One year abstracted. A half-year recovering. A two-year relationship immediately following combusting colorful excitement he didn’t realize he craved. And once that was over, the desire to camouflage again. He felt faceless. He felt empty. His mortality expanded in his mind.

He switched legs, crossing his right ankle over his left knee. He snug a throw pillow under his armpit. Out the window, a squirrel scurried up the black birch shared by him and his neighbor Dan. The visual of freedom made him emotional. While he sat indoors scratching at the inner linings of his memories, outdoors circumducted daily life. All of daily life—the mundanity, small excitements, loud excitements, romantic moments swirling an eagerness to live life. Outdoors carried on while Cameron sat inside admiring that romance. Yet an overwhelming bout of gratitude engulfed his mind as he appreciated the freedom of the squirrel. He felt freedom in that moment. His freedom was in the version to just be; to see color; to hear the sounds of suburbia—a trunk slamming; birds chirping; the faint smell of barbecue from someone’s backyard. And then the image of smog entered his mind again. Smog and a blow of biological warfare. A snow mower brayed across the street. His legs twitched. Suddenly, he felt himself in the fetal position he was clawing himself out of. He stretched his legs out. Reflexively, his arms rose and the muscles in his torso expanded from its rigid posture.

He already plowed his driveway and deiced the porch. He knocked the icicles out for himself and seventy year-old Sophie and Dan. He felt gratitude for the comfort of his couch, the throw pillow cushioned perfectly under his forearm. The sunset heated his legs like a warm, clement blanket. But he needed to get outside. The evening chill would activate his sharpness.

The high-pitched shrill of a truck stopped in front of his house. The mailman. His name was Richard Carpenter like from the Carpenter’s but he preferred to be called Dick. Cameron didn’t find that names like Dick and Guy sounded natural so he called him Rich. He asked Rich if that was okay, of course. Rich didn’t seem to mind. He bobbed his head while listening to Nelson Riddle and loading Cameron’s mail into his Gibraltar Classic mailbox. Cameron asked him about the same-old—grandchildren, grocery deals, the parcel service in the seventies. Rich took off for Dan’s house and Cameron went inside with his flyers and bills. He went into the kitchen and checked his phone.

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On the other side of town Clarke stripped herself clean of her uniform. She was cold in her underwear. The carpet warmed her feet and then the heat of a hot shower. The atmosphere was orange and pink and she had been adjusting her apartment to springtime frost one day and warmth another. She stood in front of her bathroom mirror watching one more and then one more sixty second TikTok clip. Succulent mock-Wendy’s chicken sandwiches even though she didn’t like chicken. Boneheadedly simply algebra tips. Car maintenance tips. Forty-five minutes later, she managed to pull herself from the instant gratification and stare at her home screen. She turned on a Tech House playlist inspired by Deborah Cox remixes. She went to her messages. She scrolled to six months prior.

*How do I get to the filter from the glovebox?*

Accompanied by a photo.

*Right side. Slide it off the pin.* he responded.

*Thanks!* she said.

She ended up not even changing anything. She started to type. She couldn’t think of anything clever. She held down on the screen to prompt the “Select All” dialogue. Her finger slipped to the send button. Fortunate for her, the Effects screen appeared. Her turning stomach relaxed as she exed it out and erased the message. Her mind raced. The hiss of the shower stimulated her. She suspended all of her apps, closed them out one at a time, and reopened Messages. The text crawled across the screen with the ticking. She sent the message and went into the shower.

The music faded from her speaker in the bedroom to notify her of a text message. She splashed sudsy charcoal soap onto the bathroom floor checking in.

*Was just about to do yard work.* he said.

She tapped Speech-to-Text and dictated, “I want to do yard—” The grey bar pulsed but no words appeared. She tried again louder but the grey bar just pulsed again. The microphone was attached to the speaker, she realized. She went back into the shower, rinsed off, and shut the water off. She wiped the screen of her phone.

*I want to do yardwork* autocorrected to *I want you hard work* and she sent it before she could correct. *I want to do yardwork!* she corrected. She laughed to herself about the faux pas as she patted herself dry and stepped into a silk slip. Water poured down her décolletage as she began her thirty minute braiding routine. Her hair was short and dumpy while wet. Between taking it out and putting it in a bun and taking the bun out and braiding it for the night, she rarely had a chance to actually do anything with herself. For those few minutes before she took her nightly shower, she’d reason that she was attractive at certain angles. Her guesses were devoid of actual validation. Fortunately, society enforced she didn’t need it. She refuted the demands of society, however.

*You can come if you want.*

With raging sequencers and synthesizers amplifying the buzz of imminent romance, she ran in place on her tiptoes to doff herself of combustion. She saw herself smiling in the mirror; beaming. And then she saw her hair—shrunken, drab, and lifeless. Not to mention wet and sensitive to that day’s frigidity.

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Cameron could no longer see the amount of earth he was slinging into the woods so he could no longer measure how much land he wanted to excise for his strawberry garden. For the thirty-six inch wide dugout in progress, he would have only been able to plant two seeds or six if the runners would be modest. He decided in that moment that he’d plant six seeds and simply clip the runners. The Quinault variety was best-suited for the climate—spring soil in interval with the summer solstice made for an enthralling lapse of time observing the thriving process of nature. The first crop would bloom by the end of June. Fruit would sprout throughout summer. By the end of summer and early autumn, complete fruit would bud and bear to reveal deep green leaves and white flowers transitioning to bright red succulent strawberries. He stuck the shovel into the deliquesce dirt. He took a defensive stance against the ditch, driving the shovel into the dirt one last time and then tilting the handle to stand it up straight. Steam rose from the top of his head. His palms were bruised. His face was hot and red. He felt his heart pumping his veins through his temple. He felt life.

When he went back in, he breathed in the clarity of simple minimalism. Something like a pastoral alcove. One thing for everything he needed—a dining table at the center, an iPhone charger on the counter, a half-full cup of water next to the sink, an opened toolbox in the corner with the stud finder missing. He went into the living room to admire the finished frame mount. He sat on the couch and looked at his phone. His last message sat lonely. Slowly, he began to ask about her whereabouts. From the bottom of the screen, grey lettering arose. He tapped on the map that accompanied it. A blue dot traveled down his road and pulled into his driveway.

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The headlights spotlighting Cameron on his back porch faded as Clarke leapt out of her car. Her hair was straight with wispy bangs sweeping her eyelashes. She apologized for the delay as she drifted to the foot of the steps. His shirt was moist and dirty. She presented a trowel and a tiller in the palms of her hands like a proposal. Flirtatious eyes leveled above an ambivalent smirk.

“I finished what I could today,” he said.

His voice announced and she gawked at him almost in admiration with his shoulders wide at the top of the stairs. She put one foot on the step.

“Well anyway. Come in. Come in,” he waved.

She followed him, taking in the scent of labor must and Total synthetic motor oil. She took in a waft of animal litter upon entering and noted that she never knew he had a pet. He pointed to the upper level of his house as he shared his cat’s name indicating the cat was upstairs. She apologized for her tardiness again as he led her into his living room. She praised the wall mount, adding sarcasm to her awe as she pet the plywood for its superiority amongst woods. Knelt on his couch with stockinged feet soles in the air, she twisted over her shoulder.

“What are you going to put in it?”

“Not sure,” he said.

“Let’s make something!” she said, wide-eyed.

He positioned himself akimbo, flirting with the idea contemplatively. She spun herself around onto the ground and leaned into him to acquire his full conviction. She wasn’t a pleader but she wasn’t too proud to appeal to people. She felt a combination of her honest longing to participate and some indifference for her own mental wellbeing made her a decent negotiator; however, she hadn’t been successful with much of her entreaties in a while.

“With what?” he chuckled.

“Anything. Do you have computer paper we can glue together or an old towel?”

He started for the kitchen. She followed and cut him off to inspect the frayed rags her began to reach for. They were soiled and dingy but looked marbled when laid out. She traced her hands over the chaos of the filth, pressing her finger down on heavier spots to see if they’d smudge. By the time she turned around, he presented two cans of Benjamin Moore paint. Stormy Monday and Gentleman’s Gray. He tossed newspaper onto the kitchen floor, cool like a croupier dealing blackjack. In one limber step with long arms and almost as though he floated across the room, he promptly open two high cabinets behind him and brought two used foam brushes down. He cruised across the room again in two casual steps and rinsed them in the sink. He knelt his head ever so slightly and hunched because his height gave no clearance for the valance above the sink. To Clarke, the posture exuded concentration and care. She gawked as his shoulders rotated with his diligent scrubbing like wings spanning in and out. Although he was in his own home and knowing his way around his own home was expected, Clarke found his way of appearing comfortable and thoughtful in anything he did charming.

He presented the brushes to her apologetically. She claimed they were perfect. They dripped with white paint which he told her was KILZ for the trim he was refreshing. She let the diluted paint drip over the marbled dinge and then wrung the brush dry with her fingertips on a clean corner of the towel. She pressed down until the moisture were mere smudges and then she dipped the brush into the Gentleman’s Gray and let it trail until it ran out.

They talked about art mediums which she knew nothing about. They agreed that their medium was paint on towel canvas and then disarray on doily and then eyesore on serviette. Cameron referenced Jackson Pollock who, at the very least, Clarke knew was disturbed. Clarke was entertained by the anecdotes Cameron shared. He talked with enthusiasm and existentialism and she resisted her habit of starting her thoughts with extremities like “There’s nothing worse than” and “The best thing about life is.” As they paced the eight-by-ten piece of terrycloth, she fed off of him becoming energized with the activity. She wanted to back into a seated position at his kitchen table and watch him like some sort of street art.

**Logos**

*“Arguing based on reason and facts; acquiring thought.”*

After one year, many complications surfaced one being their opposite characteristics attracting and repelling each other. Cameron sought stimulation particularly that of Clarke’s occasional mania; Clarke sought composition like what she had onlooked in view of Cameron’s garden.

Cameron didn’t want to sit still and let his mind fill with the image of another squadron patch with the black bar across. He wanted to paint and fold laundry and trash clutter in bulk. He wanted to work with until his hands until his face turned flush. He wanted endorphins to be bolstered by the self-satisfaction of occupation. Clarke appreciated the idea that she’d attain a proper resting heart rate. She wanted to count the helicopter seeds that ended up on his lawn. She wanted to observe mundanity in its most minute displays. She wanted her reality to open up hiatuses and respite; suspension of the unending natter of what she was feeling next.

They would have been able to effortlessly feed off of each other if one was happy to be their self. Perhaps a balance could be reached—one striving to be more for the other. They measured the worth of being too changing or unchanging and realized the risk was not worth dwelling on. They measured the risk of being stubborn or too relenting and realized the worth was in their longevity. The value of being firm and fixed—they realized there was none. There was great value in coordination and everything constant and only cost in single-mindedness.

There was irony in the single-mindedness of one person. Feeling adored by one person. Having myofascial trigger points braided all throughout her neck and one person to isolate that pain; digging and exhuming her anguish until he could physically feel her relief. Adoring the ramp of lassitude to electricity. The admittance of any topic whatsoever from the depth of Wendy Williams to the rewarding martyrdom of the obnoxious creative. Feeling watched and admired. Listening to stories about how the Last Goodnight is originally from his hometown and was formerly called Renata, the same name as his first supervisor. Observing his titillation be yielded by his mellow disposition. Watching him meander and following every connection because she was captivated with it being threaded into the purpose he carried at present day. So for some reason, with some rhyme and reason but not much awareness on why, they found themselves in a groove laden with clarity of just being together.