



The Mercury
The Student Art &
Literary Magazine
of Gettysburg
College

Volume 2022

Article 4

May 2022

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Recommended Citation

Method, Alicia () "Plastic Horses, Wooden Trains," *The Mercury*. Year 2022, Article 4.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2022/iss1/4>

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Plastic Horses, Wooden Trains

Author Bio

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Plastic Horses, Wooden Trains

ALICIA METHOD

I thought I would give him a tortoiseshell watch because when we were kids, he loved this cartoon about a turtle, and he was obsessively early to each and every event he ever had to attend in his young life. He took it from my sweaty hands with a little bit of consternation between his eyebrows and confusion next to his lips, so I explained the gift and he grimaced. I knew he didn't like it. I didn't mind because it is the thought that counts and there is always next year.

His dark, almost black hair was scratching at his eyeballs in little straight clumps as he put the watch back in its box and turned around. His back was slightly hunched, as if his feet were tired and he could no longer muster the energy to keep his spine erect.

"Do you want a hug?" I asked, not knowing how he would answer but intending to give one despite any response to the contrary. He turned around and grimaced again. I flew at him and gripped his body in an embrace that should have, would have, shattered his ribs if he hadn't gotten so damn big this past fall. I stood straight and began feeling his muscles. He laughed a little and started to move back. I pressed my hands on the stomach that had begun inching forward over his pants.

"You're nice," I said and picked up my green purse, ready to go.

"You're nice," he said and opened the door.

I walked through it.

Later in the evening we went to a show. It was a movie about stars. Well, there was a car chase and a romantic scene, and someone shot a gun a few times, but I still thought it was a movie about stars because I saw them so often in the background of the scenes. Dan disagreed. He said it was a movie about violence and love and how they mix so often, too often. I shook my head, understanding what he was saying and not, and ate my popcorn. It was buttery and made my tongue soft. When we left, I fluttered my fingertips by his because I felt it was the right thing to do. He shoved his fingertips in his pockets.

His pockets were made of this brown corduroy material. When we got to the car, he put the corduroy jacket around my shoulders because it was chilly. I kept remembering his red raincoat that washed up on the pond by Grammy's house after Storm Alfred. Storm Alfred was a gigantic rainstorm, big enough for a name, but not big enough to be called a hurricane or tropical storm. Just like we were big enough to play outside by ourselves but not big enough to be in my pink bedroom with the door closed.

The day that Storm Alfred hit, Dan had taken off his red rain jacket to prove he could walk through the forest without getting scratched. But while he was out walking through the forest not getting scratched, the rain came. I remembered standing by the pond, staring at his jacket, getting wetter and wetter and wishing, for some reason, that I had remembered to wear thicker socks that day. Eventually, I got scared and ran inside and shivered and dripped all over the couch while Grammy judged me over her yellow spectacles—but he wasn't scared. He showed up ten minutes later on the porch completely soaked, buck naked without a scratch on him, smiling.

In the car, he put on soft jazz and drove slowly. I knew he had changed because he used to drive fast to Death Cab for Cutie. Mom always said that people change when they go to college. Her sister had gone to school loving Jesus and come out not having gone to church in two years. I didn't care so much whether or not Dan still loved Jesus, just so long as he still loved me.

"Wanna play something different?" I asked, holding on to the brown corduroy pockets.

"Put on whatever you like," he said, gesturing to the radio. I reached my hand to the knob and closed my eyes. I heard Dan chuckle, a deep babyish chuckle that sounded like beer and roasted nuts.

"Girl, you still doing that? You gotta get yourself an aux cord."

"I like the surprise!" I insisted and started fiddling.

"You like not having to make decisions," he countered in that same beer-tinged voice.

The Paris Sisters' dreamy voices suddenly filled up the car like a fog. Station 106.3: top hits from the 60s and 70s.

*And when I'm away from you
I love how you miss me
I love the way you always treat me tenderly
But darling, most of all
I love how you love me*

Every time Sherrel or Priscilla's voice came on with "I love," I saw Dan's shoulders tense up a mile high. I thought maybe he liked it. My house was ten minutes away from the theater. We got back in eight. I was through the front door holding an awkward goodbye before the credits were over.

...

I thought I would give her a wallet with pink roses because she loved collecting coins when we were little, and we used to play in her aunt's rose garden after a good rain. I knew she would love it, even before she opened her eyes, hidden playfully behind bangs with her hands outstretched to receive the gift. I took those ten seconds to devour that memory of her shoulders and knees, hunched on her bedroom floor at twelve years old, laughing through the pain of her first period. It had been a year since I had seen her last, another school year flown by, but when she opened her berry brown eyes, I knew she was just the same.

"It's perfect!" Kayleigh said, cradling the soft leather.

"You're perfect," I said, cradling my cotton hands in each other.

She laughed awkwardly, shaking her eyes behind the wisps of her hair, and I opened my mouth as if I had anything good to say. I didn't so I sort of snorted and rocked on my heels. But then rocking on my heels led to my heels breaking the frame of her favorite picture, a photograph of her new boyfriend and her, and to too many apologies from me.

"I'm sorry Kayleigh," I said. "How about we go on a walk?"

She told me the only reason I didn't ask if she wanted to go on a walk was because I was a man, and I told her the only reason she wouldn't was because she was afraid her new boyfriend would see us. After that she opened the door like she wanted me to leave.

I walked through it.

Later in the evening we went to a puppet show. I've always thought puppets were evil because Mom said ventriloquism was a sin and they creeped me out, but Kayleigh liked them, so we went. While the puppets were talking, I mocked them, making obscene faces. Kayleigh chuckled

and hit my shoulder. I whisper-asked why she liked this sort of thing and she told me she liked seeing reflections of a distorted reality. I thought that was a tad dramatic for a puppet show so I shifted sullenly in my seat.

Afterward, I asked if she wanted to go out for coffee. She asked if Mark, the new boyfriend, could join us. I told her yes, of course he could. I didn't like Mark, and not because I am protective of Kayleigh (I've known her since she was three), or because I am supposedly jealous of other people who can make her laugh for more than five minutes (I held the record at 4 and 32 seconds). I didn't like him because he was smelly and too tall.

The whole time they were sitting next to each other, drinking bad coffee, I kept staring at Kayleigh's earrings. She was wearing these stupid yellow duck earrings that popped out from her face like lasers. I remembered the first time she got her ears pierced; we were ten. Ten-year-olds nowadays aren't supposed to go off by themselves for long periods of time, but our parents were old-fashioned. We would careen on our bikes to the ice scream store to the back of the library to the drug store parking lot, racing and laughing and trying to best each other in one thing or the other. We used to get naked together too. Not in a sexual way, in an utterly naïve, let's run around, garden of Eden sort of way. That all changed by the time we were nine or ten.

Kayleigh decided she needed her ears pierced the first time we entered Grace's Knick-Knacks, a store that sold plants and jewelry and candles. Grace's Knick-Knacks went out of business in under a year. Grace had earrings everywhere, up and down her ears, inside her nose, her bellybutton—there were even rumors she had jewelry where no one could see. The first time we stepped in, Kayleigh saw Grace and demanded an ear piercing. I don't know if Grace was certified or trained, but she ripped out a kit and did it on the spot. Kayleigh's ears bled and swelled intermittently for a week, but she had her earrings. Kayleigh always liked copying people, taking herself from the characters who popped up on our horizons.

In the car on the way home, we dropped Mark off at his house. He asked Kayleigh if she wanted to go in with him. She said no. After he left, I asked if they had had a fight. She looked at me like I was crazy.

"What?" I asked.

"Dan were you just at the coffee shop, or was that some kind of astral projection?"

"I wasn't really listening, sorry. You guys seemed happy together."

"He told me I was the worst kisser he's ever been with. And that he's thinking about moving to California."

I was silent for a moment, breathing through her anger.

“Well, I guess that’s not gonna last.”

“No shit.”

I knew she had changed when she cursed because she never used to swear. Instead, she would make up silly nonsense words and use them as placeholders for the things she didn’t dare voice.

What the foojiggle

Holy Shmarsh

I thought maybe, since we got older, we’d both really been only using silly placeholders instead of saying the things we thought.

“At least he was honest,” I said.

When we reached our block, we sat on the curb by her driveway instead of going inside. There was a light on in the house across the street. The lit-up room had pink wallpaper and papier- mâché butterflies stuck to the ceiling and door. There were two kids playing on the bed by the window, a boy and a girl. The girl was lifting purple, plastic horses in a cantering motion, the boy was laughing. Finally, he picked up a wooden train and slammed the heavy machinery against the horse. The girl, agitated, punched him on the shoulder. Immediately, their childish yells were ringing muted in our ears.

Kayleigh thought it was endearing. I thought it was ridiculous.

“I remember when we used to roughhouse like that,” I said, my breath pouring into the wind like cigarette smoke.

“I remember when we used to talk,” she retorted, “Really talk.”

“I sort of preferred it when there were plastic horses and trains. I knew what to say to you better.”

Kayleigh was silent. I knew she was thinking about bikes and earrings and rainstorms and the days when we didn’t care so much about what to say as long as we said it.

“Next year, I’ll bring you a train,” she said.