

MR. SUNSHINE

AUDREY RAYMOND

Accepted by the Graduate School  
in partial fulfillment  
of the degree of Master of Arts

M.A. Committee

Mr. Sunshine



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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School  
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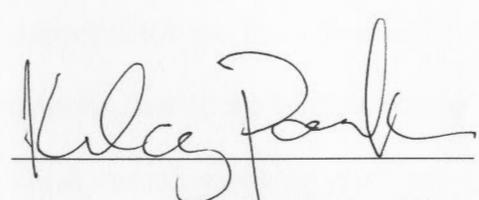
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Mr. Sunshine

Staring into the Sun—a Look at Characterization in "Mr. Sunshine"

Works Cited

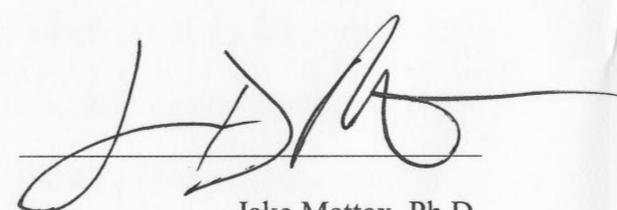
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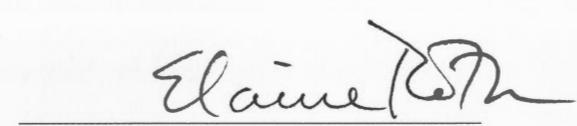
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Mr. Sunshine

Ryan raked his hands through his hair and stared at his phone screen. He had already looked at her message twice: "Thanks for the drinks. I'm game for that dinner this weekend. Call me." Why had he given her his number and not the other way around? Had he said dinner was definite?

Ryan pushed his chair back from his desk and surveyed the lot. The rain was cutting down on business. Few people bothered getting wet to look in the windows of the 30 or so cars at Biggy's Auto Sales. Those who did were desperate, and Ryan could get them into a car in under an hour.

He thumbed through the new inventory list from one of the larger auto auction places. A bumble bee striped Mustang that had been in impound for 40 days was going to be the one to watch. Nothing else looked that impressive, although they could probably make a grand or two off a few of the Toyotas that had been recalled and rehabbed. The pages of the magazine started to blur, and Ryan's head started to pound. Maybe he could step out for an early extended lunch. Come back when the rain was done.

Carlisle Biggs drummed his fingers on his desk as Ryan stood before him. "Hell, son I don't care if you cut out for the rest of the day. Aint nothin worse for the car business than a goddamn rainstorm unless, of course, it's a blizzard. Although that hail we had back in November of '99 screwed me out of a few good cars. Couldn't pull all the dents out for nothin in the world. Took a helluva hit on the old Allstate policy."

Ryan worked for Biggy's in '99 and knew how many hail damaged vehicles Allstate paid for and how many of those unwitting customers paid for again. He smiled at

his boss and offered to bring him back a sandwich. "I'll pick you up a hoagie from Marty's if you want."

"You're going to Marty's then? I don't suppose you'll make it back with the sandwich, son. Why don't you just hack off the rest of the day?"

"If the rain stops while I'm there, I'll finish up, grab a breath mint and your hoagie. Be back so fast you'll think I stopped the rain. Start calling me Mr. Sunshine."

"Yeah, yeah, Sunshine. Take your happy ass down to Marty's. Tell the ol son of a bitch he needs to trade in that piece of shit Camaro and get somethin respectable for a man his age. You can tell him I said that."

Ryan grabbed his Biggy's rain jacket from the bottom drawer of his desk. When he unrolled it a pill bottle rattled to a stop in front of his right foot. Ambien. He wondered how long it had been since the last rain, because he knew he had searched for those pills at least a solid week when he lost them. He smiled at the lucky find. If Marty's had the hoagie on special, Ryan decided he'd buy an extra lottery ticket.

Marty's was barely open, but Ryan hadn't expected it to be full-tilt at barely eleven in the morning. The front lights were on behind the bar highlighting the top shelf liquor and old man Marty's bald head. He was dumping a 5 gallon bucket of ice into the stainless steel hopper swearing at the pieces hitting the floor. Otherwise it was dark and quiet; not even one of the 6 tvs was on, and the jukebox still hadn't been plugged in from the night before.

Ryan sat down on the one barstool still covered in the original dark green. He hated the others that one-by-one had been recovered in a heat producing red. The green

flirtation and see how far she would go. He could make pleasant pre-date conversation. The problem was he couldn't remember all of what they had talked about the night before (or was it the night before that?), and he still wasn't completely sure of her name. Another drink with his food would probably be what he needed, just enough to tweak his courage and finish off the headache for good.

"Hey, Marty. What's the sandwich of the day?"

"It's so damned early I don't even know yet." Marty answered while flipping on the last set of lights. "I tell you what. You pick, Ryan. How bout that?"

"Early! It's going on noon any minute." Ryan rubbed his eyes and looked at his empty glass.

"You walked in just after 11, and unless that rain's done some crazy voodoo on you, I know you didn't take an hour to drain that glass. You ready for another?"

"Make it a double. It's my last one. I think that rain is going to stop."

"You might be right." Marty looked out at the big drops falling from the gutters and shrugged. "And let me guess, you want the hoagie special."

"Yep. And one for Biggy too. Can I get a picture on this middle tv here?"

"You know where the remote is. I got a sandwich to make." Marty stopped to pour the gin then shuffled on to the kitchen.

Sometimes Ryan thought Marty must be his best friend. Ever since he had nursed him through when Elizabeth lost the baby. Ryan hadn't been able to force himself to stay in the house with Elizabeth zonked out of her mind on valium, whimpering whenever she moved. At first he had tried to comfort her, but when he wrapped his arms around her she just screamed. Her mother had been those first few weeks and stared at him like he had

twisted the cord around the baby's neck himself. The stare followed him to every room in his own home until he couldn't stand it. He left one night. Just got in the car and drove. Somehow he ended up at Marty's.

He had felt comfort that first night having a few anonymous drinks in the company of 3 or 4 other guys doing the same thing. He had sat at the bar with his head tilted back to see the tv overhead, but didn't actually watch it. Marty had attempted to start up a conversation with him, but when his "little missus" jokes fell flat, he just stuck to pouring the soul searching serum that had kept him in business 29 years.

Ryan had been grateful that night and all those that followed. Marty's had given him a comfort he couldn't find at home with Elizabeth. One minute she said she didn't want to live anymore. The next she asked if they should try again. He hadn't been able to navigate her moods, but he learned his way around a 12 ounce glass, and eventually, Marty's.

When he left for his early lunch he knew he'd find the door unlocked even if the open sign wasn't yet flipped in the window. And it never seemed to bother Marty if he was there on his stool watching the opening rituals.

The sign was flipped now and Marty was behind the bar preparing drinks and jotting down lunch orders. The fryer was sizzling with overloaded baskets of the best steak cut fries anywhere in town. Ryan slid his thumb over the message from the cuddly looking brunette and hit Reply.

"Wish I could take credit for the drinks. U earned them w/ that smile."

Within an instant she replied, "U made me smile."

"Back at u."

Marty set the plate of fries and monstrous hoagie down. Without a pause he grabbed the ketchup caddy and a fresh drink and set them in front of Ryan as well. "Eat up, kid. Doesn't look like this rain is stopping for a while, and either way, you're going to need a companion for that gin." He winked and moved on to Bill and Bart at the end of the counter. They were decked out in their finest bibs. Bill had his customary wrench and hankie hanging out of the pocket. Ryan waved and nodded his head in their direction.

Bill shouted down to Ryan "How's the car business going these days?"

"Same as ever," Ryan replied, "and the old man counts his pennies just as careful as always. You don't dare use one square of Charmin too much around that place."

"I'll bet. You want another before you head back, or are you cutting out early?"

"Sure I'll take another, Bill. Thanks. I'll be headed back in a little while, but a few of these won't do any harm." Ryan motioned towards his half empty glass. He made a regal bow at the waist without getting up from his stool, and Bill poo-pooed his gesture saying something about how Ryan could get him next time.

Ryan rested his hand on his cheek and studied his food for a moment. The rain made him tired. The gin made him warm. The phone made a noise. "I've never had luck with guys I meet at bars."

"U might wanna prepare for a change. Ur about to get lucky."

"U prove my point."

"No. Ask anyone I'm the luckiest guy around. Nobody has it better than Ryan Holloway."

"I'd like to believe ur not like other guys."

"NO way."

"Ur a GREAT dancer thats an improvement over most."

Ryan vaguely remembered asking her to dance. He had slid his fingers along the base of her neck underneath her hair and drawn her close. It had looked like he would kiss her, and at the last moment when his lips almost touched the corner of her mouth he had said, "Would you mind if I embarrass myself by leading you to the dance floor?"

"Dance floor?" She had looked around the tavern and saw no such thing and no other couples. He had grabbed her hand and pulled her over to the juke box. Marty had turned up the music for them. The jukebox lights had begun to spin like he was in a tilt-o-whirl. When he had moved with her he felt like he was repeatedly whizzing by the big intermittent bulbs of a carnival sign until he had to close his eyes and sway against her.

He wanted to dance with her again. "ha ha u aint seen nothin yet."

"I'd like to," she wrote. And just as Ryan considered offering to send a picture, she added, "omg I mean more dancing!!!!"

He pushed his plate away and drew the last from the accompanying drink. He looked for the drink Bill bought him. Where the hell? He scanned the room for Marty who was manning the fryer. No use getting his attention and having him burn his hand off. Ryan decided to tell the new girl about the wedding while he waited.

"I have a wedding to go to this weekend."

"poor thing."

"Wanna crash it with me?"

"Its not much of a crash if ur invited. You couldn't find a date?"

He wanted to ask Marty where his drink had gone. Hadn't he and Bill done a toast in the air? Or was that with his first drink? He was going to lose it if Marty was cheating

him. All the money he had ever tipped and put into the place, and Marty was going to pull a fast one? "Marty!"

"You made pretty easy work of that hoagie there. Want me to make the carryout for Biggy yet?" Marty cleared the plate into the bus tub.

"I wanna know where my drink from Bill is, Marty. The man works hard for his money and shouldn't have to worry the drinks he buys his friends aren't ever making it to their destination."

Marty clinked two empty glasses in front of Ryan. "This one you bought. This one Bill bought. Ok? What are you talkin about? Drinks and destinations, criminey." He resumed his spot leaning against the cabinets highlighting the top shelf liquor.

"I asked a girl to the wedding this weekend. The one from the other day."

"Nice looking girl, Ryan. Maybe this one will turn out good."

"Yeah. Maybe. Pour us two while I hit the head, would ya?"

Ryan ambled over to the decaying dark wood door. He pulled it open wide with the drawer pull Marty had slapped on in place of the knob years ago. He didn't bother with the hook and eye that never stayed locked anyway. He peeled his jeans down off his hips and sat, too tired to stand. A pill bottle rolled out of his pocket and rattled as it hit the tile. He wrenched it open and stared down at the white pills through the puff of prescription dust. Fuck it. He rolled saliva around in his mouth until it gathered just behind his molars. With the ball of spit, he swallowed a pill and breathed.

When Elizabeth had left him almost six years ago, he hadn't known for two days. The first day he had tripped into his empty bed sometime in the morning assuming she was already at work. The second day he hadn't made it home from Marty's. He had been

having a few drinks with the new salesguy who suggested they make use of some pain pills he had. The first one had done nothing, so they each took one more. Ryan had lost consciousness a half an hour after that. The new salesguy had freaked a little thinking he could be to blame if Ryan never woke up, so he had told Marty he'd get him home. Instead, he had dragged him to the car and finally to his couch where he checked him for breathing and put an afghan over him before passing out himself. Both men woke up about twelve hours later: new guy without a job, Ryan without a wife.

Elizabeth had left him a note explaining she was leaving him for someone else. He could have his drinking to keep him company. She was no longer satisfied waiting up all night to try and have half conversations with a man who might or might not remember them the next morning, and might or might not piss himself in the process.

She had eventually married Someone Else when he got her pregnant. Ryan's mother told him last week that Elizabeth's daughter Alyssa was going to be the flower girl in the wedding this weekend—the second marriage of an old mutual friend who lost his wife to cancer four years ago. Ryan had run into Elizabeth then at the funeral. He had been signing the book when he heard her laugh. He had stopped short of finishing the word street in his address leaving an awkward “Stre” hanging after Birch.

She had been standing near an ugly ficus shaking hands with Doug's parents. Ryan had thought she looked fat in the maroon wrap dress. Even though her legs had looked as toned as ever in the open-toed heels, she couldn't quite hide the post pregnancy pooch being cut in half by the dress's sash. He had sought out Doug, clumsily embraced him and made his way to the exit before she could approach him.

Ryan hoisted himself up off the seat and watched the blue-dyed toilet water swish and swirl out of sight only to be immediately replaced. When he got back to his stool, he noticed the lunch crowd had thinned out. Marty nodded his head up at him and resumed watching the replay of the Cubs versus Cardinals from the night before. Ryan smeared the condensation on his glass with his fingers then across his eyelids. He slammed the gin. His heard his phone's message notification.

"Since u have a wedding wanna do next weekend instead?"

"I meant it that you should come w mwe."

"Seems kinda weird for a 1<sup>st</sup> date."

"maybe im a weird gy."

"If u weren't I wouldnt know how to handle u."

"Do you know how?"

"Only time will tell."

"No time I need a date now."

"pushy pushy."

Ryan waved his glass at Marty. "You know, Marty, I'm having second thoughts about taking this girl. She might get the wrong idea; think she's someone special. I don't wanna go through that shit like I did with that chubby blonde, Katrina. Remember her calling me all the time? Asking me where I was? Who needs it. I'm my own man, Marty. Elizabeth did me a huge fucking favor when she left. I can do whatever the fuck I want without any Elizabeths or Katrinas or, or . . . or any other bitches getting in my way. You know?"

"Yeah, I know all about it, Ryan." Marty eased Ryan's hand and the glass back onto the bar and silently refilled the ice before adding the long pour. "The rain stopped a while ago. Biggy called down and ordered his own sandwich. He figured you probably headed home already. I told him you had quite the headache when you came in, but nothing else."

Ryan stared at Marty, then his gin. He saw the white paper bag with the edge rolled over and the receipt stapled to it. Biggy's hoagie. Before clipping his phone to his belt, he sent a message: "pushy? do us botha favor and pushy the dellet button."

He swayed when he stood, his body on the pivot of his left foot kind of twirling toward the bar and stopping where it connected with his hip. He removed the red coffee stirrer and drank. Ice hit his face, and a stray cube hit the floor. "Total me up, Marty, and gimme Biggy's food. I'll take it to him. The sun's out, and I have cars to sell."

Ryan wiped sleep out of his eyes before stepping out of his car. He didn't remember sleeping. He had gone to Marty's for the game after work. The usual game crowd had been there waiting for the Cubs to score, so they could have a shot on the house. Any one of those people had a better TV at home than what Marty had suspended from each corner and even stuffed between the bottles of Crown and Grey Goose on the top shelf. But watching the Cubbies wasn't about having the best TV. It was about having the best drunken Wrigley story or wearing the most expensive replica jersey with the scattered set-in stains of wing sauce and all-beef hotdog grease that would never relegate it to the back of a drawer.

Ryan loved Cubs game nights. Since he arrived ahead of the crowd, he still got his seat at the bar and the bulk of Marty's attention for those first few mind-quieting

drinks. By the time the first of the fans arrived he was ready to hand out fist bumps and join in chanting "Go, Cubs! Go!" Pretty girls in tight tees stretching the C across their Cs or Bs, hell even Ds, hugged him with each run. By the 7<sup>th</sup> inning he could easily be overcome by the patriotism in that night's rendition of "God Bless America" and hold onto one of the cuties—head on shoulder; hand on ass. Just before she could complain, he'd order shots. Then they would both smile and lift their ounce to "America and the Cubbies!"

Last night there had been no shot girl. Ryan had maintained his corner spot, cheered with the crowd and took his free shots. He had stopped himself just before he grabbed Katrina in the 7<sup>th</sup> inning. She had been there with her new beau, some fat fuck with a receding hairline. Ryan had unclipped his phone and pulled up her name in the contacts list. He had deleted her with satisfaction. No more late night texts telling her he had made a mistake and could he come over to just talk. It wouldn't be a big loss. She snored and wouldn't make the cats get off the bed when he was there.

He had looked at the text history between himself and the girl from the other night. He had probably fucked up again. "Hey" he punched in. Then he had motioned to Marty to set him up one more time.

Wednesday already. Ryan headed towards the door then doubled back for his coffee, a glorious mix of Folgers dark roast and caramel Bailey's poured into a travel mug that read World's Greatest Dad. Elizabeth had tied a bow around the handle and left it in front of the coffee maker the morning after she told him she was pregnant. He carried it now, because it was the only mug he had that could make the Big Gulp look like child's play. He smelled through the steam and relaxed.

Thankfully, Biggy wasn't in his office. Ryan sidled by and slid into his chair. 8:05. Not bad. He looked down at the title paperwork occupying his inbox. Through the first solitary swigs, he logged into his email to see if he could talk any window shoppers into coming in for a test drive. Last week he had sweet talked an empty nester divorcee into a Pontiac Grand Prix Biggy hadn't been able to move in a month.

He lost himself in thoughts of Ms. Kathy Phillips going down on him in that brilliant blue hunk of shit. She probably had ten years on him, but the Restylane she had likely purchased in a last-ditch effort to keep her philandering husband gave her lips the most perfect pout. He closed his eyes. He tuned out the door chime. He fell asleep.

His phone vibrated his waist band, and his dream continued with the gentle tug of her aged hands on his belt. The second vibration woke him. He opened one eye then the other. He found his coffee and carefully brought it to his lips. It was cold. He detached the phone and looked down at two pending messages: "I didn't expect to hear from you again" and "What did you want anyway? I was already in bed when you texted." received at 10:00 and 10:03.

He looked out through the reception area relieved to see Biggy still hadn't come in. As he brought his eyes back to the computer screen in front of him, they swept over the figure of Biggy's niece Angelique. She was seated at the reception desk neatly coated with multiple layers of receipts. She looked alright, then again, she never really looked spectacular.

"Morning, Sunshine," she said looking up from her bookkeeping. "You were snoozing away when I got here at 9:30. Just so you know, he'll be in at 11:00. Been at Happy Taxi all morning trying to iron out a deal. They're interested in picking up a few

cheap minivans for their airport routes. You wouldn't dream of letting him sell that '05 Caravan would you? How could you live with yourself knowing all the memories we made in there would be trampled on by trust fund kids and asshole business men going God knows where?"

"Angie, our memories can't be bruised by duffel bags and Samsonite. Or have you forgotten I never let you out of the luggage compartment? How are you, Babe?" He touched her hair, at least three shades darker than when he saw her on last month's first Wednesday, as he walked over to the coffee maker.

"Things never change. Still helping my uncle stay out of trouble with the IRS. Still working part time at the cupcake shop on 3<sup>rd</sup>. I'll be graduating from pastry school next spring."

"That's something to be proud of. Lots better than being a grimy used car salesman."

"Sure. IF you get a chance to open your own shop. Otherwise, you're always cutting out fondant leaves and mixing batters for someone else."

"You can mix my batter any day" Ryan laughed at his own joke, but Angelique gave him the stare of death. "C'mon, Ang, you know I'm just kidding."

"With you it's hard to tell."

"You doing anything this weekend?"

"Oh, Ryan. . . I'm not sure. . ."

"Hey, just hear me out. I've gotta go to this fucking wedding. Doug's getting remarried. You remember my buddy whose wife died a few years ago? Anyway, you can get all dressed up and drink all the booze you want. Whaddya say?"

“Ran out of other options, huh? Okay. I’ll go. But you’re not staying the night. I swear I’m still scrubbing puke out of the grout in the bathroom. You’re a pig, Ryan. That’s what keeps you down. Girls with self-esteem don’t go pig.”

“Yeah? Too elevated on their high horses to have any fun in the mud? You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“You forget. . . I do.” Her words were acidic, but she smiled and winked. Ryan sipped and sauntered. The title paperwork needed to look touched before Biggy got back, and he needed to write a few text messages.

Ryan woke up late Saturday. Friday after work he had gone with Biggy to toast the management staff of Happy Taxi on the purchase of 4 mini vans and an SUV. He didn’t know how Biggy understood a thing “Joe” said. Ryan smiled and nodded at the appropriate times forever looking for the waitress to return with happy hour snacks and libations.

He had his hands in his lap most of the evening hiding his phone and sending messages to Sam—Samantha. He had finally gotten her name by asking who she was named after. Luckily she was named after her father and felt the need to explain Sam was short for Samantha. He changed her listing in the Contact List from Bar Girl.

She was a dirtier girl than he expected, and he was thrilled that the last few days had been spent discussing positions, parts and places. She’d even capped it off with a shadowy boob shot from neck to navel. He knew she would’ve been more fun at the wedding than Angelique, but she was still adamant he shouldn’t take a fling to the wedding. He tried to convince her it might be more someday, but she seemed even more

turned off by the idea than he was. He stored that tid-bit in the back of his mind behind the best years for the Taurus and his mom's birthdate.

So, here he was dressing for the big to-do, feeling nothing. He reached for the plastic wrapped suit his mother had dropped off. She said it was his father's and it was a classic—timeless. All he knew was it was free. He unhooked a paisley tie from his rack, then thought twice and reached for the blue stripe. Angelique was wearing blue. She might appreciate the attention to detail. He grabbed blue underwear too.

Angelique rushed out to the car before he had a chance to put it in park. She had attached a giant flower to the side of her head that made her look almost lopsided. The orange hibiscus created a stark contrast from her dark hair. Her form-fitting blue dress dipped down exposing some impressive cleavage, and the hem skimmed the tops of her knees which shined with post shaving lotion. She smiled a tangerine smile and hopped into the car, "Let's do this thing!"

"You look nice," he managed. "I thought we might have a drink to smooth out the rough spots; ya know?" He pointed to the cooler on the floorboard by her feet. She rolled her eyes and opened the hinged lid to look inside.

"Well, the mountains are blue. I guess these babies are ready to drink." She handed a can to Ryan then popped the tab on her own. "Here's to the dumbasses who think marriage will last!" Their cans bounced off one another with a ca-chunk.

They sat in Angelique's driveway drinking the 6-pack with their seats pushed all the way back and reclining. The tentative spring sun weaved in and out of the oak leaves above and splattered the hood of Ryan's latest loaner from Biggy's—a beige Chrysler he had detailed before leaving for the Happy Taxi ass-kissing Ramadan Friday. Ryan

reached down to put his last empty into the cooler just as Angelique bent to do the same. His nose brushed her shoulder. He placed a small kiss on her upper arm. He smelled baby lotion. He wished he hadn't screwed her over. He reached up to touch her hair, but she took his hand and put it on the steering wheel. "Better get this thing to the church."

God's Heart Missionary Church was surrounded by a gravel lot with crudely placed rail road ties for parking. Ryan pulled the car into the last spot in the third row and helped Angelique out. She took his arm as he led her to the octagonal building with the 10 foot steeple that narrowed with every foot until he could barely see it against the sky.

An elderly man in a houndstooth coat opened the door for them. The carnation on his lapel hung sort of sideways, but his smile was perfectly center. "Welcome. Welcome! They're about to get started. Here's a program. It includes the hymn, so flip through that when you're done looking at the pretty bride. That is if you can take your eyes off of your sweetheart." He patted their linked arms as an usher approached to place them on the groom's side.

Ryan didn't find Elizabeth in the quick scan he gave the crowd before scooting in beside Angelique. He used his left hand to smooth the stray hair he could feel floating halo like above him. His right thumbprint began to sweat into the program, but he didn't want to let go Angelique's arm to look at it yet. They were in the next-to-the-last row. He could see the chiffon swirling out in the entry way behind them as the ushers closed the doors.

Doug and his groomsmen took their places. The delicate prelude was turned up to a more noticeable volume as the Welch's train came into station. Each woman was dressed in an abundance of fluffy dark purple ruffles. Their full skirts contrasted their

bony shoulders left bare by the strapless lace-up corsets. Determined to reach her destination without tripping, not one looked up from the flowers in front of her for more than a second.

Ryan was appreciating the results of gravity defying boning and waist trimming lacing when the audience's demeanor changed. Angelique put her hand to her mouth and gasped, "Precious." The flower girl was sprinkling her rose petals in perfect handfuls up the aisle. She stopped and grabbed the much younger ring bearer's hand just before he darted into the audience. She placed his pillow in her basket and continued her task, pulling him, not gently, along. She looked as though she had stepped out of one of the many childhood photos that had been on Ryan and Elizabeth's end tables. Her hair was curled and carefully pinned atop her head framing her angelic countenance. Elizabeth stepped into the aisle from 4 rows in front of him and snapped a photo. The flash lit her face enough to reveal a spray of freckles along the tops of her cheeks and bridge of her nose.

The audience rose, and Ryan became part of its collective body. He turned, as it did, toward the door when the march began. He sat when it sat. But his eyes never left the face of Elizabeth's little girl. Almost his little girl.

The phone jangled in his pocket during the congregational hymn. He stopped mouthing the words and pulled the phone out far enough to enable reading the message: "How's wedded bliss? Champagne flowing yet?" It was Sam.

The sweet irises followed the newlyweds back down the aisle, this time coupled themselves. The little ones were retrieved by their parents, and suddenly the grown-up tots were babes in arms once again. The ushers stifled yawns. They tried to hide the smell

of alcohol on their breath and blot the shaving cream residue on their rentals from decorating Doug's car.

Ryan and Angelique were led from their seats and waited in the receiving line. Angelique's left arm was no longer resting on Ryan's right. When she was released by the usher, she had gripped her bag with both hands. She stood beside him doing nervous half-twists that lifted her skirt.

With an automatic necessity, Ryan propelled them through the line flirting with each bridesmaid and fist bumping the guys. Doug let out a short battle cry "Ryyyyy! Yaaan!" and wrapped him in a bear hug that nearly lifted him off the ground. "God damn; it's good to see you. How's the car selling business? You and Biggy still schemin' and skimmin'?"

"Dude, you know it! I could sell a Yugo to Lee Iacocca himself."

"And charm the pants off a snake. He winked in the direction of Angelique who was shaking hands with the bride. "Who's the girl?"

"You remember Biggy's niece, Angelique that works in the office."

"The girl with the . . ." Doug motioned outward from his chest and back in toward his abdomen and tilted his head to glimpse a better look at Angelique talking to his wife.

"Yeah." He hoped Angie hadn't heard him. "Introduce me to this beauty of yours. Stephanie?"

With all the well wishes given and a pit stop for Angelique, they left the church. Safely installed in the car, he popped open the glove box against Angelique's knees. He pulled out a crumpled soft pack and fished out the last half of the joint he started on the

way to her house. He pulled hard dragging in as much as he could then held it until the pressure in his sinuses popped open his mouth like a marionette. He exhaled.

He had only seen Elizabeth's back as she was trying to sacredly run after a flower girl gone wild in the sanctuary. She had been dressed in rose crepe. He swore his mother owned something similar. An exasperated "Alyssa!" had escaped. He had laughed to himself and pulled Angelique into his body while they stood in line.

Angelique hadn't gone rigid. Not like Elizabeth had when she invited Ryan to her the first time after losing the baby and every time thereafter. Even when they had put on music and poured wine. Her words had been "yes" and "I'm ready this time," but he had always felt her body go stiff under his and attempt to repel him. He would look down at her sealed eyes and imagine pennies on the lids. Limp against her thigh, he would curse into her hair and push her hand away.

"You gonna share that shit?" Angelique reached for the joint and turned on the radio. She swiveled on her ass to the beat, her skirt sliding easily against the leather. They passed it back and forth. Ryan laid his head back against the headrest and looked at the twin cigarette burns just above the window. He touched them--first one, then the other--over and over, until he decided they were the very definition of identical.

The parking lot was sparse by then. The old man from the church ambled toward his Chevy. He doffed his felt hat in their direction. Angelique tugged at her dress and poked her head, then torso out the window. She yelled out a farewell to his tailpipe. Ryan smiled.

“Your wife is frumpy. I felt kinda bad for her. I mean, the pantyhose alone were atrocious.” She said this as she smoothed her own clothing and reached in her bag for lipstick.

“The little girl will look like her.”

“Well, let’s hope style isn’t inherited. She’ll be the only kid in the class photo wearing a muumuu.”

“And curlers in her hair.”

“Flickin’ a cigarette.”

They laughed at these images of a young girl wearing “Mama’s Family” fashions. From his driver’s side mirror, Ryan barely saw the wedding party start to file out of the church and into their cars. Pictures were over. He raked his hair and turned the car over the rest of the way. The radio stuttered for a second and he heard the ding of the phone. He read Sam’s latest message “ok have fun”

“it would be more fun with you, but I’ll survive. At least I have your picture to get me thru.”

“U promised to delete that!!!”

Angelique stirred beside him. He patted her bare knee with his free hand. It was 4:00. Cocktail hour would be well underway by the time they arrived. Probably Miller Lite on tap and Sutter Home for the ladies. If they were lucky, Doug would’ve sprung for bar vodka or rum. Top shelf at the cash bar. He thought of the \$40 in his wallet and hoped Angelique had her own funds.

He locked the phone and put it in his pocket. He turned to Angelique and said, “Just Mom checking in. We better get over there before the bridal party at least. We

might even find a seat at the bar.” In response, she turned up the radio and sang along with “Tiny Dancer.” He thought of Alyssa spinning in her flower girl’s dress up by the altar. He drove out of the lot in the tan monstrosity he’d sell next week with a Biggy’s advertising frame wrapping the paper plate, boasting “Nobody makes a BIGGer deal!”

In writing “Mr. Sunshine” I strove to develop the character of Ryan Holloway using as little summary as possible. I believed action and reaction in action (past and present) would characterize Ryan more than summarizing paragraphs of his inner thoughts or backstory. With the guidance of Joseph Novakovich in his work *Fiction Writer’s Workshop* and a working knowledge of Ernest Diaz’s time-hopping techniques featured in his short story collection *This Is How You Love Her*, I knew I could show—not tell—the reader who Ryan Holloway was.

The story begins at Ryan’s desk in the small time car dealership where he works. Novakovich discusses the benefit of setting up repetition and habit in a fictional character. With enough repetition, the reader begins to expect certain reactions from the character, and the author creates “the expectation of how a person will behave in a given situation, based on the observation that she has behaved like that many times” (Novakovich, 57). I formulated repeated locations for Ryan to visit like the car dealership, the neighborhood bar and (through flashback) his home, so I could orient the reader in his world. Although there are no sweeping descriptions of the scenery, the reader begins to get a feel for Ryan’s daily environment. Every time he seeks out his favorite stool at Marty’s or flirts with the bookkeeper, Angélique, at Biggy’s the reader gets a sense of déjà vu, because she knows she has been there with Ryan before.

### Staring into the Sun—a Look at Characterization in “Mr. Sunshine”

For my final project, I chose to concentrate on the art of characterization. I didn't want to create situations and have a character react to them; rather, I wanted my character's status quo and existence in his habitual locations to define him to the reader. In writing “Mr. Sunshine” I strove to develop the character of Ryan Holloway using as little summary as possible. I believed action and reaction in scenes (past and present) would characterize Ryan more than summarizing paragraphs of his inner thoughts or backstory. With the guidance of Josip Novakovich in his work *Fiction Writer's Workshop* and a working knowledge of Junot Diaz's time-hopping techniques featured in his short story collection *This Is How You Lose Her*, I knew I could show—not tell—the reader who Ryan Holloway was.

The story begins at Ryan's desk in the small time car dealership where he works. Novakovich discusses the benefit of setting up repetition and habit in a fictional character. With enough repetition, the reader begins to expect certain reactions from the character, and the author creates “the expectation of how a person will behave in a given situation, based on the observation that she has behaved like that many times (Novakovich, 57).” I formulated repeated locations for Ryan to visit like the car dealership, the neighborhood bar and (through flashback) his home, so I could orient the reader in his world. Although there are no sweeping descriptions of the scenery, the reader begins to get a feel for Ryan's daily environment. Every time he seeks out his favorite stool at Marty's or flirts with the bookkeeper, Angelique, at Biggy's the reader gets a sense of déjà vu, because she knows she has been there with Ryan before.

It is raining in the beginning of the story. The weather opposes the title from the beginning scene putting the reader immediately in the action asking, “What mood will this story actually take on?” and “Who is Mr. Sunshine, and will he be able to combat the likely dark, rainy mood?” To begin answering those questions, the story narrows in on Ryan Holloway at his desk. Due to the rain, Ryan is a bit more tethered to the indoor environment of the dealership than he would normally be. As the story reveals his hangover, the rain seems the perfect stroke of luck for a man in his condition: “Few people bothered getting wet to look in the windows of the 30 or so cars at Biggy’s Auto Sales... Maybe he could step out for an early extended lunch. Come back when the rain was done” (1). Ryan’s reaction to the rain implies to the reader he might be outdoors engaging with customers in better weather—ever the charming salesman.

I had to be especially careful not to dwell on Ryan’s profession. With a car salesman, it would be easy to fall into a flat character ditch that Ryan might have to take great lengths to climb out of. Novakovich simplifies the notion of flat characters as stereotypes that can make an author seem bigoted. He suggests rather than “shutting out and insulting a segment of the population... by reducing them to flat types” an author should “draw portraits (51). I knew Ryan’s portrait was much more than a sleazy car lot snake. Almost immediately, I let the reader in on that. She can gather that Ryan Holloway does not take his profession seriously. He doesn’t let it stand in the way of his drinking which he proves by coming in hung over and leaving early. He also doesn’t let it slow down his womanizing—he maintains his texting conversation with his mystery dance partner from the weekend and attempts to repair the lost connection he had with Angelique—within his workday. On the other hand, Ryan seems proud that he helped

Biggy unload hail-damaged vehicles to unsuspecting customers and that he can get anyone into a vehicle in under an hour. Unlike the typical car salesman, he doesn't seem to dwell on these achievements. He admits part of the reason for his success is the desperation of customers who turn to Biggy's for a vehicle. Ryan distances himself enough from his profession allowing the reader to compare his daily habits to his behavior outside of work—outside of sales.

The most prevalent setting for Ryan outside of work is a nearby neighborhood bar—Marty's. When I wrote the description of Marty's, I not only desired to orient the readers in an environment, I desired that environment to come to life as a silent character in the story. The living environment was then able to make its guest list. When the readers ponder the setting of Marty's, I set them up to ask, "What sort of person would frequent a place where barstool seat covers are replaced one at a time (or not at all), bathroom stall doors are barely rigged to stay closed and the bartender has to beat on the ice machine with a wrench?" How does Ryan behave in the bar, which readers can infer is his home-away-from-home? He gets drunk. He gets confused and somewhat confrontational. He attempts self-gratification cajoling any woman who will let him into her personal space. The Ryan of Marty's is self-pitying and selfish, characteristic slowly realized with each visit the reader takes alongside him to Marty's.

Although I wanted to rely almost solely on setting for character description, I did not feel Novakovich suggested it. Where I wanted to use Ryan's active scenes perpetuated by his chosen settings to tell his entire story, Novakovich does not deny the necessity of summary if carefully used and concise: "The summary gives us the relevant aspects of the past, so we can stick with the dramatic present" (52). No matter how much

I wanted to rely solely on Ryan's placement in time and place, as well as the scenes within those settings, I could not create a full character without some backstory.

I was working with a troubled character who, from the outside, appeared to be a dopey car salesman with a drinking and/or drug problem and a penchant for temporary female companionship. Ryan was more than that, and I wanted the reader to understand his behavior, if not empathize. In order to accomplish that, I could not let his past remain mysterious, but I wanted to tell the story of Ryan's background without full paragraphs of summary. I believed these large blocks of information uninterrupted by dialogue or action would slow down the story or encourage the reader to skim (much like I do when faced with them). Novakovich warns that attempting to stuff background information into a scene stalls the action (62). I strove to prevent summary from stalling my character's forward movement and decided to rely heavily on flashback as the method for telling Ryan's backstory.

The way I wanted to allow Ryan's past, through flashback, to create a lens with which to see his current character reminded me of some aspects of Junot Diaz's story collection *This Is How You Lose Her*. Diaz uses forward and backward movement in each story to show a different glimpse into the life of his main character Yunior. On the surface, Yunior can easily be described as a selfish, womanizing, arrogant misogynist, but many layers exist beneath the machismo facade. This description doesn't explain the tender-hearted Yunior who spent his Thursday afternoons looking over comic books with his crush, Nilda, who his brother takes as a lover and, to Yunior's disbelief, mistreats (32-33). His full character develops only from the combination of stories which have Yunior leading the reader on a complicated, time-hopping dot-to-dot, unable to see him as a

sensitive, intelligent man who believes he must be the living legacy of the brother he idolized and lost to cancer until the last pencil stroke.

In that first scene in *Marty's*, Ryan flashes back to the period immediately after Elizabeth and he lose their baby in child birth. He clearly struggled with the guilt of not knowing how to handle her grief, and the reproofing looks from her attending mother only hurt him more. He does not put his own grief into specific adjectives and adverbs, but the narrator brings the reader in to his inner thoughts from that time: "Ryan was grateful that night and all those that followed. *Marty's* gave him a comfort he couldn't find at home with Elizabeth. One minute she was saying she didn't want to live anymore. The next she was asking if they should try again. He couldn't navigate her moods, but he learned his way around a 12 ounce glass, and eventually, *Marty's*" (5). The reader grasps how lost Ryan felt in his own home with a wife he couldn't pacify. All of these emotions and memories are residing in Ryan, but brought to the forefront at *Marty's*. The sympathetic reader would be grasping for backstory and filling in blanks without this flashback and this neighborhood bar.

When I reviewed the scene, I applied Novakovich's view on flashbacks. He talks about flashbacks as a way to slip out of the current time frame to give pertinent information and not disrupt the flow of a scene; however, he also warns that a story can only handle so much flashback. In order to keep the balance he suggests to the author: ". . . you probably need to resort to summaries of relevant character deeds and inclinations outside of the story's time frame" (Novakovich 62). While sitting in *Marty's*, Ryan goes back in time in his mind. He shares his memory, not as a scene, but a synopsis.

At first, I was disappointed I was unable to avoid taking the reader temporarily out of the action with summary. I thought the use of flashback would allow me to tell the entire backstory while never taking the reader out of the action. My bias, against what I considered to be tedious blocks of boring information, would have prevented the reader from obtaining needed clarification for Ryan's character. In my proposal I said I would carefully craft summaries as needed without relying on them, but I was surprised to find such a lengthy section that worked so well. I believe it gave the reader exactly the information I had hoped. I would not change it.

Although I learned I was unable to develop an entire character and his story by showing not telling, I did not work completely outside the parameters I originally set up. I was still able to rely heavily on setting through the manipulation of place and time to enhance character development. As I already discussed, the places Ryan inhabits give him an identity. That identity is one that hides its deeper feelings. By using the narrator to go back in time and tell the readers relevant information about Ryan's past, I was able to share with readers what Ryan would probably feel, yet never say, in a present-day scene.

Ryan's flashbacks provide nearly all of the backstory regarding his relationship with his ex-wife. These snippets of information that pop up as Ryan's private thoughts allow the reader to interpret his actions as the story progresses, and I was not forced to write an additional story on the topic of Ryan and Elizabeth's courtship, life, pregnancy and break up. With a short trip back in time, the pertinent information needed to process the present makes an appearance and blends in to the action. The rest of Ryan Holloway is told in present day. He moves forward as the reader turns the page.

As the story progresses, the reader can reflect on his current actions and those gathered from the glimpses into his past. Outside of the self-pity, turned self-indulgence, which Ryan must know was brought on by his grief, he doesn't know he would make the same decision if given the chance. The reader can see what he can't. He has not matured. He is still the man who walks away when the personal investment seems too costly.

The reader has the upper hand in character analysis through knowledge of Ryan's backstory and the current scenes. This complexity allows the reader to predict the character's reactions to his environment before the character knows what he will do. Novakovich calls this the unchangeability of a character. He explains, "Of course, not all characters undergo a crucial change. With some characters, their unchangeability and constancy make a story (Novakovich 48)." In "Mr. Sunshine," I created a character who exists not for some grandiose plot, but for journeys to his day-to-day places and situations. Ryan Holloway becomes a story by being true to his own nature—a nature defined by his past, present and presumed future responses to outside stimuli.

Diaz treats his character Yuniór in much the same way. He does not have Yuniór make apologies or justify his actions. He, instead, creates a nuanced character who develops not only within each story, but from story to story. It is impossible not to apply the knowledge gained from one story to the next. "Nilda," the second story in the collection, centers on Yuniór's brother, Rafa's relationship with Nilda, a transient teenager who spends Thursdays looking at comic books with Yuniór. Yuniór observes his brother's treatment of Nilda, from ordering her to make them lemonade to having sex with her in their shared basement bedroom (while Yuniór attempts to sleep). While Nilda

is one of many girls for Rafa, Yuniór struggles to get even one date and is both disgusted and in awe of his brother's prowess and physical beauty.

"Nilda" gives hints to Rafa having an illness accompanied by pain and exhaustion. At page 39, it is clear he has died: "I guess two years passed. My brother was gone by then, and I was on my way to becoming a nut." Yuniór is so affected by the death of his brother that the man he called a monster in the beginning of the story is canonized by the end. That information sheds light on the womanizing adult Yuniór who is introduced in the first story "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars." Diaz's manipulation of time to compound knowledge of his character is nothing short of brilliant. I strove to emulate this technique on a much smaller scale to explain and round out the character of Ryan Holloway.

I began this project with the desire to test my ability to show the story of my character rather than tell it. I looked to Novakovich and Diaz for ways to do this and chose the manipulation of place and time to bring my character to life. Although the settings (time and place) in "Mr. Sunshine" were perhaps the most important parts in developing the character of Ryan Holloway, I must concede they were not the only ones, and above all, it would have been impossible to avoid summary completely and still make a complete character.

Andrey Raymond

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