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Can Love be Blind?

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Can Love be Blind?

Cover Page Footnote

Honorable Mention: Student Creative Writing Contest

Can Love be Blind?

by Bethany Russell

HONORABLE MENTION: STUDENT CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST

Bethany Russell was a sophomore at Taylor University when she wrote “Can Love Be Blind?” She grew up in the lovely little town of Grabill, Indiana, where she played out countless stories with toys before she could even write. Bethany loves horseback riding, making music, and creating art, which often involves her illustrating her stories. “Can Love Be Blind?” is her first published short story.

If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning.

—C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Without warning, the music had dropped into a low yet delicate melody, and the shuffling sounds of shoes filled the courtyard as groups of dancers split into couples. Once realization hit Hannah, she was instantly overwhelmed at the close proximity of him. She’d been so confident before, spinning wildly and bumping into strangers to the bouncy tune, but now somber expectation weighed on both partners. Despite the tension, Blake did not retreat to the side of the dance floor but continued to hold her hands after their spin move at the end of the previous song. As he had first guided the hearing-impaired girl through his world, now he also guided her in slow dance.

His hands were indeed soft as one slipped from her fingers to a considerate spot slightly above her hip. He held her tightly, remaining firm even while she stumbled with her footing.

“I’m so sorry! I can’t dance when I can’t see.”

He let go of her hand and gingerly touched her chin with his thumb, “You don’t have to see when you’re dancing, silly. Just follow my lead.”

As he withdrew his hand from her face, the motion brought to her nose a subtle waft of his natural musk. Such a scent was difficult to

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describe, but perhaps the closest smell that carried resemblance would be lavender with a sort of masculine aftertaste. This, combined with the mellowness of his voice, drifted her into some kind of surreal trance, entangling her in emotions unlike anything she'd ever experienced.

Halfway through the song, Blake stopped dancing again and they stood silently together for a couple seconds. Hannah could barely hear the chirruping of the insects over the knocking of her own heart in her ears.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

“No, no. I just think,” he took and lightly traced the features of her face with his fingers, “you’re truly something else.”

Her heart soared in ecstasy. As Hannah replayed his words in her head, she smiled broadly; however, it quickly dissolved at a tragic thought. She'd tried dismissing it, but she could not escape the truth that they'd see never each other's smile. How desperately Hannah longed for him to see hers and for her to see his just once. Even so, she swore there were times that she could hear it in his voice. She fantasized what he might look like, imagining a strong complexion being broken by the sudden glow of joy.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sting of hot breath blowing on her lips. He had edged incredibly near to her, causing her heart to jump at his sigh. The immense magnetism of his proximity drew her in, and she only hesitated before closing the gap between them.

* * *

When Hannah first found herself in this bizarre world, she recognized the absence almost immediately. She was completely captivated by a new “blackness” so deep and penetrating that it extended well beyond the concept of black as a “color.” That which she observed was an emptiness, closer resembling a vacuum rather than something tangibly perceived. So thrown by this sudden shift of reality was she that it took her several minutes to notice hands tugging her by the wrists through the waters of an icy, reeking bog. The water soon shallowed, and the hands released her, plopping her face first into the thick muck.

“What's...?” She raised herself up from the slippery mud and clawed at the clumps of ooze on her face, which lodged beneath her fingernails.

“Hey.”

The voice was almost inaudible, as were, she'd discover, most of the other voices and sounds. She opened her eyes to see him for

she didn't yet realize the absence of light in this world. Initially, she thought mud was still in her eyes, but when she cleared most of it away and still couldn't see, her next reaction was panic in assumption that she had gone blind. Greater was her confusion when the owner of the hands—a boy—did not understand her problem of blindness, as he comprehended all her English with exception to words relating to sight. Since he was a stranger, she doubted it was a joke, and when he seemed to express concern for her she reserved to consider these things in her heart whilst she gathered more information. Hannah quieted herself with the rationale that this was not the oddest thing that she'd encountered for she'd gotten lost before. The best thing to do was let the world carry her through while she sought a way home.

Although she could not exactly pronounce the boy's actual name, it sounded close to Blake, so she ended up calling him such regardless of her likely mispronunciation. This boy, Blake, invited Hannah to his home to get cleaned up and then guided her along the path, for although she tried to feel her way around, she tripped every other step. The swamp was hazardous, ridden with twisted roots, sinkholes, and an autumn chill to top it off. Without him, Hannah knew she would probably have gotten sick-or worse. Even then as she shivered he took her under his arm, covering her messy, smelly body with his windbreaker.

Upon pulling open his door, the lull of soothing fragrances filled her lungs. His parents, whom Blake later informed her worked in the extract industry, were quite hospitable and pleasant despite her intrusion. The mother helped her wash up and brought her to a spare bedroom. As she took a step forward, Hannah thrust her foot into an animal of some kind, which shrieked and scuttled away. This worried the parents, but Blake explained that this girl was significantly disabled in her senses of perception. Next, he seized her wrist and led her hand around the room to feel the furniture. His brusqueness scared her; however, the mere charm of his quiet voice reassured her as he spoke about the room's layout.

Blake steered Hannah around the room in a peculiar sort of dance that was comprised of her being spun in an ovular route while she ran her hand against the many textures surrounding her. At one point, her other hand wandered wayward from their spinning and lighted on his face. She drew back and apologized immediately, but he took her hand and placed it back on his cheek.

“Go ahead.”

She still shied away, withdrawing her hand and saying, “I don't

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understand what you want me to do.”

“This is how we introduce ourselves. Here.”

She stiffened as the soft tips of his fingers invaded her face and searched her features. Her skin tingled hotly and shivered as they traced the bridge of her nose down to her lips and up again to her eyes where he abruptly stopped.

“What are these things hidden under here?”

Blake poked her eyeball like a button. She reared back, shoved him away, and clutched her eye as she groaned between her teeth.

“Oh, I’m sorry! You can feel that?”

“Yes. That was my eye.”

“What’s that?”

“An eye. The thing you see with.”

“Is this the concept you referred to earlier?”

“Yes. The eye is the organ that captures light so people can see their surroundings. For some reason, mine are not working but that doesn’t mean I can’t feel them.”

“Can I touch them again?”

“No. Go touch your own eyes. You’re too rough with mine.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

He took Hannah’s hand and raised it to his face, for he was somewhat taller than her. Then Blake proceeded to direct her fingers to feel along his skin as he had done to hers previously. From what she could gather, Blake had a defined jawline, full lips, and a decent nose, but as her fingers approached the place where his eyes would be, there was nothing! All she felt were two valleys in his skull, and she screamed.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, nervously.

“Where are ... your eyes?”

“I don’t have them. No one has those things that you have. I’ve never heard of such ‘organs,’ which makes me concerned for you because you might have some kind of tumor or disease that’s affecting your brain.”

“What? No, they’ve been here my whole life. Most everyone has eyes.”

“Not where I’m from. Hannah, these are anomalies. You should probably see a doctor.”

As much as she pleaded with him, Blake and his parents could not be convinced otherwise. Hannah was to be taken to a doctor that lived in town.

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The doctor wasn't too far from the country home of Blake and his family. He amiably greeted her and conducted a diagnostic, checking her heart rate, temperature, and reflexes. Following this, he had her take a series of short, specialized tests to determine her senses of hearing, touch, and smell. By the time he finished, he said, "I do believe that I have found the problem."

"Is it an illness?"

"Not exactly. However, I did find the answer as to why she's running into things and speaking exceptionally loud. It seems that Hannah has a rare and serious condition that prevents her from properly perceiving. Specifically, she has two extra organs in her skull that seem to serve no purpose aside from drawing the ability to sense from her ears and nose. To fix her disability, it appears that we will have to surgically cut out the extra organs."

Hannah stood so rapidly she knocked back her chair.

"That's alright, let's just give it time," said the mother.

"I do have a temporary solution." The doctor then explained the procedure before asking, "Hannah, would you please give me your arm?"

The world exploded in a new way. The shot the doctor gave awakened within her a lucidity of perception. She could hear tremendously better, and on the walk back home, she noticed a variety of pleasing scents and enchanting songs of the marketplace.

Blake heard her laugh and squeezed her hand as they strolled along. Although now she could hear everyone coming and sense that which was around her through smell and touch, she hesitated to tell Blake, for she secretly preferred the firm assurance of his grasp.

Delighting in the wonder and life happening around her, Hannah mused to herself aloud, "Blake, I wonder what it's like to live in your world without eyes."

"There is a lot to do here," he said simply.

A thought occurred to her.

"Would you show it to me?"

"Sure. I can take you to some interesting places."

* * *

A curious child at heart, she reasoned to explore for both pleasure and for clues as to how to escape. With permission, his parents went on home, and the two veered off in a different direction.

"The best way to both experience my culture and talk is at a restaurant, I think," he said, "It could be a trade because I'm interested

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in this mysterious concept of sight you keep insisting is real.”

At the table, they traded answers and questions. Blake told her about how time was formally indicated by the ringing of bells and informally through temperature cycles. In turn, he asked Hannah for more detail about what it’s like to see. She told him that it was similar to hearing in that it was perceiving something without direct contact. They talked about this for sometime, but Blake still could not understand it regardless of how Hannah described it. Eventually, there was a break in conversation, which spurred Hannah into asking a default question.

“So...what do you like to do for fun?”

“I like nature and making sculptures.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I can show you when we get back. What do you like?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I like running; other times I like listening to music. It depends on the day. I guess I like doing whatever makes me happy.”

“Happiness is nice. I wish I could be happy all the time,” Blake sighed.

Hannah sipped her lemony drink. The taste was tart and bittersweet with a tang of something unidentifiable. “Is yours also a rough world to live in?”

“I don’t know. Rough compared to what?”

“I mean, is it challenging and difficult to live life here?”

“It’s not particularly easy or hard.”

“Where I’m from, life is rough. War, for instance, is rough.”

“War is natural. People die all the time.”

“I don’t think so. People die more painful deaths and at faster rates during war.”

“So? Everyone is going to die. It’s natural.”

The food came. They each received a veggie wrap. As she bit into it, Hannah squirmed with glee. A flurry of complementary tastes bombarded her taste buds, and she couldn’t help but grin.

“Doesn’t that bother you though?” she asked mid-chew, “The fact that you have one life, and you’re going to die, too?”

“Hardly. I was already not alive, and right now all I’m doing is living, so why would it be a problem if I wasn’t again?”

“Don’t you like living?”

“I mean sure, but it’s not like I’m going to feel anything when dead.”

“So, you don’t value your life?”

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The ice in Blake's glass clicked against the sides as he took a drink. "I value it. I'm living, so I might as well enjoy it and help others. It'd be a waste if I didn't take care of my life. That's why we have doctors."

She couldn't help but be taken back. Who was this boy that neither feared death nor honestly valued life? How did he stay sane and have the motivation to keep living if life meant nothing?

"Do most people here share your opinion?" she asked.

"Probably."

"So what do you do with murderers?"

"The law takes care of them to help society function. It makes life easier."

Engrossed in conversation and fascinated by the other's polar view of thinking, the two carried on into the cooler hours of the day until Blake suggested they make their way home. This, however, would be far from the last of their times spent together. Thoroughly enthralled by her backward philosophies, Blake found an excuse for Hannah to stay in the guest room as a foreign exchange student and soon began asking Hannah each day to informal events, although he never used the term "date." Little by little, Hannah began to understand his world and his way of thinking. After several months, the two were inseparable and would spend almost every waking moment together. Hannah's feelings quickly began to overshadow her priority to escape, and she started to forget as Blake replaced these thoughts.

When summer vacation was nearing its end, the two were out hiking and had taken a trail past the swamp to a special grove. Here, they listened to the water cascade down a stream between the trees, as it gargled in harmony with the tunes of woodland birds. It was then that Blake finally broke the taboo of their mutual yet unsaid feelings.

"There's something else I'd like to ask you," he began.

"Sure, anything," she replied, impulsively.

"There's a community dance celebrating the end of summer soon. I wasn't going to go initially because those things make me uncomfortable, and my mom was also going to have me run some errands. But, I was thinking she might let me go to the dance if we went together and since you want to experience our world. Would you be interested?"

"Sure, yeah. Why not? It'd be fun."

* * *

This was but a week ago. Now, here they stood, face-to-face, with

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Hannah closing the gap between them.

Theirs was a kiss deep yet gallant.

When at last their lips pulled apart, they were at a loss for words, for the bated breath of both dancers had caught them by surprise. Usually, two such as themselves would not find such mutual intimacy until later in time; however, there was uncanniness to the way one complemented the other. Both bloomed in their hearts and were stolen away by the atmosphere. They simply stood, drinking in the sheer presence of the other, and even after the kiss, they held each other tightly, foreheads pressed together.

“I think I really like you,” Blake murmured, his voice shaky.

Hannah lightly kneaded his arm. “I don’t want to be merely liked,” she said. Then, she was still for a moment before asking, “Do you think you could you ever love me, Blake? Even when you find the world this meaningless?”

“I’d care for you deeply.” He gave her a peck on the forehead.

Hannah could hardly feel it over the weight of her question. “Yes, but would you love me?”

His honesty was painful. “I don’t really know.”

She ran her fingers through the downy hair at back of his head. “Let me show you.”

Hannah pushed his head to hers and this time, she kissed him with the fullness of her compassion overflowing from within her. Needless to say, he kissed back, ever so flawlessly delivering his benevolence, yet she still could feel something was missing. Though it was wonderful, the kiss felt unbearably empty, not just because she didn’t “sense” his love but also since she knew he’d likely never have the capacity. One discovers the profundity of love amidst suffering, struggle, and sacrifice. But even in these trials, neither Blake nor his people would find any value, for they neither found value in life nor anguish. These people merely sought happiness because it feels good and healing because pain is uncomfortable.

She described this to him with much grief.

“I’m afraid I can’t understand this different love you talk about, but perhaps it wouldn’t be a problem if you perceived the world as I. If you gave up your eyes and recognized the world for what it really is, then we wouldn’t have this barrier.”

“Yes, but I can’t do that. It’s not what love is.”

“Hannah. . .” he sighed, gently pausing before speaking. “Since I’ve met you, I’ve had this fear, and now I’ve been agonizing it for months. The truth is, I’ve been so terrified that you’d leave. I was

originally scared to fall for you and when I let myself, I dreaded your retreat back to your world. I know it's so selfish! I'm sorry, Hannah. I just want to keep you here and hold you." He took her hands in his. "Forever."

"Oh, Blake. I wish we could be together, too." She took a breath to continue speaking, but he interrupted.

"Really? Oh, I'm so relieved! You have no idea how this has been relentlessly eating away at me every night. It's just been such a burden to think that one day I'd have to ask you."

"Ask me what?"

His hands slipped from hers, and she could hear the sound of rubbing fabric as he dug into his jacket pocket. Before long, he had her hold out her hand as he dropped something cold and metal into her palm. She felt the thing in her fingers and found it to be an elegantly ornamented spoon with a sharp tip.

"What's this?"

"It's a spoon. I'm asking you to make a big sacrifice, and I know it's a lot to ask, but Hannah, the injection and those pills the doctor gave you will soon wear off, and you'll be resistant to them. If we are to be together long term, you have to get ride of these vestigial eyes. They are parasitic, sucking away your capacity to perceive the world around you from your other sensory organs. You would be handicapped and would never be able to do simple things like feel the warmth of my embrace or hear the voices of our children if we have them."

She immediately dropped the spoon, and it rang shrill as it smacked against the stone pavement. "I'm sorry, Blake. I can't!"

"*Why?*"

Hannah cradled herself with her arms. "I'm scared!"

"I know it will hurt, but it won't last long! The spoon has been dipped and coated in painkiller. The doctor himself gave it to me to give to you, so you can stay here with me, and we can be happy."

"Happy? Really?"

"Yes." Blake drew her into an engulfing hug, resting his chin on top of her head. "Just stop for a moment and let me hold you."

Hannah nuzzled against his chest that was adorned in a shirt of a mystically silky yet cozy texture. His body was warm and still smelled of lavender despite the power of his extravagant cologne.

"Wouldn't you miss this?" he whispered rhythmically as if reciting a poem, "Wouldn't you miss how it feels to be cared for? If you do this basic thing, we can enjoy life and be happy forever."

Not wanting him to move, Hannah was silent as she relished his

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affection, but soon his words caught up to her and she had to respond.

“But what if one dies before the other, Blake? Then, we won’t be together forever.”

He stroked her hair and tucked it behind her ear. “Forever is what the present time feels like. Forever is as long as you make it. Let us make it a long and happy forever—just me and you.”

She leaned back and unwrapped his arms that were around her. “But I don’t want that if we can’t actually be together forever.”

Blake scoffed. “That forever is a fantasy. What I’m referring to is the real forever that’s now.”

Hannah’s voice hardened. “No, your forever is the fantasy because it’s not actually forever. Yours is not only temporary but also short. The happiness will end.”

“Who cares? Hannah, trust me. I’ll give you enough happiness in this life to last all eternity.”

She briefly considered doing the deed but quickly shrunk back.

“I can’t, Blake. I’m so sorry.”

Blake grabbed her hands and entwined his fingers in hers. “Please, Hannah. Please, please hear me out! I desperately need you to stay with me. I don’t want to be alone again! You see...I won’t love anyone else!”

Hannah wrenched her hands free of his. “Don’t tell lies, Blake. You can’t love.”

“No, Hannah! If you left, I’d be devastated. I beg you!”

“Blake, relax. The answer to the removal of my eyes is no, but I didn’t say I’d leave.”

“But you *will*! If you don’t give up your eyes, this reality will expel you back because you’re an unnatural anomaly! However, I talked to the doctor, and he said if you removed your eyes, you’d be safe.”

“But I must keep my eyes. I’d need them if I ever returned to my home world, so if it means I have to go back then so be it.”

“No! You can’t!”

His shoes clunked and metal scraped the floor as he found the spoon. She backed up two steps before he tightly caught her shoulders and forced her against nearby wall.

“I’m so sorry, but I just can’t let you go,” he grunted, resisting her struggle.

“Blake, please! Don’t-!”

“You will thank me one day,” he said, amorously as ever, “We will be happy.” The cloth of his sleeve rustled as he raised his arm.

“Blake, NO!”

He angled the point of the spoon at the edge of her right eye, and she shrieked. She threw her head back to fight it, when she suddenly saw a star. Amazed at the sight of light, she gasped, as the pinprick exploded into a gigantic mass of white that consumed the totality of the sky.

Blake instantly loosened, and Hannah slipped free in a fall to the ground. She shielded her eyes due to the prolonged lack of exposure. With minor delay, Blake dropped next to her, and the metal spoon harshly chimed, as it struck the ground a second time. The music ceased and was replaced with a chorus of dull, sick thumps as various bodies around her collapsed. Under the radiance of the sky, Hannah could see the forms of all the dancer that now lay ghastly pale and lifeless from the shock of light. She looked to the one next to her and sobbed in both mourning and in horror, for his appearance was so terribly freakish that it closer resembled a soulless corpse than the boy she thought she loved.

Hannah turned away and noticed the luminosity of the sky had focused itself into a single beam. The bright glow of the star was now searched the ground like a wandering spotlight before jerking up and glaring straight into Hannah’s eyes with a brilliance so hot it blinded her.

* * *

The beam moved from her face, and the scene sharpened.

Though it was a moonless night, the darkness appeared as day to Hannah, and for a time she just stood there, blankly gazing over the cemetery hills. Rain was billowing down in sheets, pulsing with the gusts that tore at the sparse trees planted between the graves. Hannah shivered, her clothes fastening to her like a second skin. She was surely home, but why in the world was she in Burlough Graveyard? Though it was true she lived just three blocks down, Hannah was still bewildered as to how she woke up here of all locations.

“You there!”

A man sheltered in a dim, yellow raincoat, which obscured all of him from his clerical collar down to his shoes, secured a floppy hat to his head with one hand while shining a flashlight on Hannah with the other.

“Excuse me, miss, but can I help you find someone?”

What was normally a common question now seemed strange to ask in the middle of a typhoon, but still Hannah answered.

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“I was looking for someone,” she mumbled, “though now I’m not so sure...”

The man nodded, water pouring off his hat. “Then, I can at least take you somewhere dry where you can wait out the storm.”

They slogged across the flooding cemetery to a modest building with widows lit amidst the downpour. She glanced behind her, but the man was already gone, so Hannah hurried inside and closed the door.

The place smelt of timeworn wood, and each plank creaked with her footsteps. Rows of battered pews lined both sides of an aisle that led to a single altar, while the magical stained glass windows in the walls showed no trace of chip or fracture. The interior and furnishings were well kept yet visibly historical in age, accruing Hannah’s awareness of her dripping, waterlogged state. Meanwhile, someone was playing a cheery hymn, and, despite her self-consciousness, Hannah neared the organ, for the song offered a sense of security in its gladness.

Fully expecting an elderly woman, Hannah was instead bewildered to discover a young man at the bench. Dressed in plain attire, his hair was fair and combed feathery. From what she could tell, he was close to her age, and yet he was incredibly skillful at such an old instrument. She wavered while she fascinated in his hands springing across the keys. Eventually, she conjured up the nerve to sit next to him on the bench for the sake of the music. So absorbed by his work was he that he didn’t even notice her beside him for the extent of an entire hymn.

It was only when she began humming along that he glanced over and, upon seeing her, smiled something genuine, crinkling the corners of his kind eyes.