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Once upon a Time in New York City

Keely McLean

WINNER, JOHN LITTLE FICTION SCHOLARSHIP

Keely McLean is a sophomore at the University of North Dakota from Rosemount, Minnesota, majoring in Commercial Aviation with a minor in English. Keely has spent her time here by attending hockey games at the Ralph, collecting plastic bags for the Energy & Environment Club and studying at Archives Coffeehouse. Keely is looking forward to returning to her summer job where she teaches children's golf camps, getting sushi with her friends and hiking in her local regional park. With her education from UND, she plans on traveling across the country and abroad to pursue her passions in journaling and flight.

On Keely's fiction, the Creative Writing Scholarship Committee observed: "Keely McLean's 'Once upon a Time in New York City' draws the reader instantly into the narrative with the beautiful, figurative comparison between skyscrapers and reaching, pleading hands. This primes the readers for Caroline's experiences in this story. Moreover, the story's deft use of a third-person narrator keeps us at just the right emotional remove from Caroline—building the story to a jolting, clever reversal."

Skyscrapers are like hands. They reach their glass-tinted fingers up toward the sky, scraping at the blue hue that encompasses the air surrounding a rock floating in space. The palms of these buildings are rooted deep into the ground; their veins running with subway cars, blood pumping people from Broadway to Fifth Avenue. Hand after hand, palm after palm, covering the tiny island of Manhattan. Hundreds of hands, each with their own story.

Among these people is Caroline James. Her mind crafts analogies, similar to the skyscrapers and hands. She once watched a movie starring Audrey Hepburn, where her character pulls herself together enough to make the trek to the Tiffany's diamond store in New York City in the early hours of the morning to eat a croissant. After watching this film, Caroline twists her hair up and puts on the largest pair of sunglasses she owns to ride the subway over to Tiffany's to eat breakfast just like Ms. Hepburn. She views her character as an analogy for making it big with whatever you've got.

Caroline James is also easily influenced by what she sees around her. She once heard on the street about a new workout that can get you to look like the beauti-

ful Ms. Hepburn. This workout is called yoga, and even though Caroline did not know what this was, she scoured the streets of Manhattan until she found someone who did. While she ultimately decided this “yoga” was not for her, she decided that she would soon need to find something else to try.

One morning, Caroline was eating her croissant and admiring the finest pair of diamond earrings that she had ever seen, when a man that she had never seen before approached her.

“You do know that it is raining, right?”

Caroline James peered above her croissant poised directly ready to satisfy her morning hunger. “Why, of course I do, but I must eat breakfast. Doctors are saying that it is the most important meal of the day, just like how apparently now smoking is going to kill you!” Caroline is satisfied with her education lesson for the stranger and goes back to munching on the flaky and buttery breakfast delight.

The stranger at first seemed puzzled, trying to determine the story behind the woman dressed in tweed and sunglasses atop her head even though it was raining. Most noticeably without a coat. “Doctors also say that if you stand out in the rain, you’ll catch a cold.” He offered her a spot under his umbrella.

Now, the stranger does not know that Caroline James is confident and feels as though if she needs something, she will procure it herself. She once wanted a vanilla latte, so naturally she went to her favorite coffeeshop. However, when she was told by the clerk that they were out of vanilla, Caroline thought it was best to travel all the way across the Brooklyn Bridge to find herself some. Now, most would wonder, how could the nearest vanilla be across the Brooklyn Bridge? Well, according to Caroline James, the best vanilla is across the Brooklyn Bridge and if she was required to get herself some, it would be the best.

She looked at the spot underneath the stranger’s umbrella and back up at him. Even in her heels and with her considerably tall height, there were still several inches between them. “You aren’t a serial killer who is about to claim his next victim, right? Because this would be the part in the horror film where the audience yells at me to turn your offer down and run away.”

“Do you watch a lot of films?”

“Yes, I do, it’s the ’60s and I have a lot of time on my hands,” Caroline replied, but still took ahold of the umbrella. They started walking down the street, making their way past the skyscraper fingers. Mirrors reflected the handsome young man and the pretty young woman eating a now soggy croissant underneath an umbrella. “I think that films are great influencers for life, I mean, who wouldn’t want to find love in a convenience store?” She had a slight pep in her step, walking with nowhere to go. Audrey Hepburn’s character had many places to go, and this is where Caroline

James and her differed.

The stranger glanced at Caroline. "I think that other people are great influencers. I mean, take the late great Abraham Lincoln for example, he really knew what he was doing: freeing a people with whatever power he could muster."

"Very admirable, I agree. May I ask, where exactly are we going?"

"I'm going to take you to one of favorite cafés. My name is Stewart Myers, by the way. Very nice to meet you." He also had a slight pep in his step.

Caroline undid the clasp of her fingers around the umbrella for a moment to shake Stewart Myers's hand. "Very nice to meet you, too. I'm excited to see your favorite café."

The rain slid down the glass fingers, piling up on the concrete sidewalks. The drops made their way down into the sewers, congruent to the subways and veins. Caroline James and Stewart Myers walked like little pawns on the large palm of Manhattan. She has no idea what Stewart Myers has in mind for her, and the audience watching the film of her life on the black-and-white television screen is yelling at her to turn around and run.

Caroline believes she has good intuition. When she was a young girl, she lived on the coast. She constantly heard seagulls distantly bark in her ears, with sand in her hair and sun in her eyes. Her mother was deathly scared of the sea, but her father made his living in it. He would go away for months at a time, leaving his thalassophobic wife and lonely daughter on the shore, waving goodbye. One day, she was building a sandcastle when her hands began to shake so terribly she knocked down a tower on the castle. As she gave a quick glance around for her mother, something that had washed up on the shore caught her eye. She slowly stood up, a sudden pit in her stomach growing larger. As she approached the limp mass, the ocean waves lapped the shore, seemingly giving the sand innocent and salty kisses. The first thing she noticed was the stench, then the blood. Caroline stumbled upon a lifeless body, bloated from the ocean. She stood there staring, the movie reel of her life getting caught in the projector and tearing. She did not know what to do and she does not remember what she did, but the next thing she can recall is the policemen knocking her sandcastle down.

She was once at a record store by herself. She was now twenty-something years old, still young, but she has experienced the exciting parts of life. While she let her fingers dance along the frayed edges of old vinyl cardboard covers, her hand began to insensibly shake. She could not figure out the cause or how to make it stop, but before she knew it the unsuspecting store clerk was suddenly held at gunpoint and forced to dump the cash register out into a large linen bag. The robber looked like he was straight out of a cartoon, a black sash covering his face but with conve-

nient slots for his eyes. Standing there poised with the bag open, he resembled a raccoon. Mostly stealthy in the nighttime yet highly successful. After staring at the Saturday morning film reel unfolding in front of her, sense was knocked into her head and Caroline ducked beneath the rows upon rows of records. She heard a pop, smelled the smoke, and saw the bell that alerted the store clerk of new customers jingle as the door swung shut, leaving the cash register empty and the store clerk empty as well.

Caroline does not think that she has bad luck, but that bad luck simply seems to follow her. As Caroline James and Stewart Myers jingled the bell at the café, Caroline's hands start to shake. This motion alerted her that something terrible was going to happen in the café. Turning around completely on her heel, she calls out, "I'm so sorry, Stewart, but I'm going to have to take a rain check!" While she could barely muster out the words, she tries to grab the sunglasses atop her head and slide them onto her nose, but her buttery fingers fumble and she drops them on the ground. In her head, all she hears is silence, except for the deafening crash of her large, black sunglasses hitting the cold, marble floor. Very similar to how the store clerk dropped mid-scan of a record. Very similar to the crimson ocean waves crashing around the body.

"I've got it, and I'm sorry to hear that. I was looking forward to get to know you." Stewart, bent down, takes the sunglasses, then delicately puts them on for her.

"Oh, how very sweet of you," Caroline's face instantly blushes. She wonders if maybe her hands were wrong this time. "Yes, I was excited to hear more from you as well. Maybe we'll simply have to catch a film together sometime." As she turns to go, Stewart Myers grabbed her arm.

"Well, let me at least give you my card. How are we supposed to meet up again for a film if we cannot get in touch with each other?" Stewart reaches into his sport coat pocket and pulled out a business card. This simple action reminds her of the fictional Mr. Gatsby, a richer-than-rich chap who throws elegant parties in hopes for one lady to come. They both ooze charm, but somehow she knows that Stewart Myers must have a secret similar to Mr. Gatsby's.

As she takes his card, her hands begin to shake so badly that the small piece of cardstock slips right through her fingers. "Do we have butterfingers miss?" Stewart asks, accompanied by a chuckle. While still in the foyer of the quaint, moody café the baristas' faces are plastered with annoyed looks. Annoyance due to jealousy of Caroline's interaction with the handsome man? Or because they have spent time in the establishment without ordering any coffee? Caroline James and Stewart Myers did not find out.

She reaches out for the card again, this time able to get a firm hold. The front

is adorned with a simple symbol, unbeknownst to her, but the back reads his name: *Stewart Myers Manson*, with the subtitle of “Influencer Beyond our Time”.

“I thought your name was just Stewart Myers?” She looks up at him with big, bambi eyes underneath the black tint of her sunglasses.

Stewart takes the frames and pushes them back up past her hairline. “My name is Stewart Myers. But my adoptive father’s last name is Manson, so I like to formally go by that as well. I’m from California and he teaches us the sweetest things over there.”

“I’ve always wanted to go to California. They film most movies over there, you know!” Caroline forgets her trembling fingers from earlier and focuses on the stranger’s dazzling smile and perfectly floppy hair.

“I could take you there.”

For a quick moment, Caroline pictures herself being whisked up and taken away by the handsome stranger and starting a new life underneath blue skies and palm trees. Banana pancakes every morning while sitting in the sun on a front porch drinking the sweetest vanilla coffee. Days that pass by in a yellow haze, with the stranger’s iridescent smile guiding her all through the calendar changes. Her day-dream of a life glazed in honey that feels as refreshing as a cool pool on a hot Hollywood day.

Caroline snaps back to reality, her reality with croissants in front of big diamond earrings and glass fingers that reflect her ribbon headbands and white boots. “I have a life here that I love, but thank you for offering. Only crazy people pick up everything and leave.” She peeled her eyes off the stranger’s dazzling smile and perfectly floppy hair, “and I’m not crazy.”

She quickly turns around and dashes out of the café that once felt chic, open, and groovy, but now like a shrinking box. Caroline hails down a cab and climbs in.

As her hands viciously shake, her life suddenly seems not bad. While still small in comparison to everything else, not bad. She loves crossing the Brooklyn Bridge to buy the best vanilla, she loves her white boots that give her four inches, she loves watching films and altering bits of her life to mirror them, she loves being independent in the big city, she loves the pink sunsets that hug the tall buildings each evening, she loves riding the subway to her job, she loves riding taxis back to her cramped apartment that was dripping in greenery and filled with good records, she loves wearing big sunglasses that can mask her eyes, she loved being—

The door to the taxi swings back open and Stewart Myers Manson slides his body into the backseat next to Caroline James, and he proceeds to give the driver an address she has never heard of before. Suddenly cramped in the back seat, he turns his head toward her and states, “Well, I am.”