THE VOW OF LESTER HARDWICK

 A short story by Quentin Stuckey

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 Lester Hardwick was a man who liked to do everything on his own terms, like the great Orson Welles proclaimed when he portrayed the role of Charles Foster Kane in “Citizen Kane”. Hardwick was a well-known, up and coming writer in the Toronto literature scene. He hadn’t been around for too long but he was already building a reputation at an extraordinarily fast pace. He had been published in newspapers and magazines, all of his short stories received overwhelmingly positive reception from critics and other fellow writers. Our dear protagonist Lester Hardwick was constantly being stopped on the street and asked “so Mr. Hardwick, where exactly do you get your ideas?” Of course, Lester could never give a complete answer to that question. He knew the power of ambiguity and overall mysteriousness as a new writer; a person should never reveal everything that they know. Whenever that question came up in interviews or fans addressing him on the streets of Toronto, Lester would laugh, grin with a devilish nature and say slowly: “every idea comes from my imagination.” Lester Hardwick knew that he was flat out lying but he didn’t care. He wasn’t ever going to reveal the true nature behind what people widely considered to be brilliant writing.

 The area of his life where he received the majority of his ideas actually came from his personal life. You all might be thinking to yourselves “well don’t all artists get their ideas from their personal lives?” The short answer is “yes” but you see Lester Hardwick went about his creativity a little differently than most people and that’s why he was so successful. Lester’s notoriously, unknown secret was that all of his creativity to write came out of the failure of his love life. The absence of a loving, fulfilling relationship was what drove Hardwick to write all of his short stories. Even the short stories that weren’t even about love or relationships were a result of his poorly chosen selection of women. He wrote one of his most famous short horror stories “The Creature With The Dripping Scars” after witnessing his ex girlfriend Rachel try to commit suicide in his shower. He knew that Rachel had been suffering from severe bouts of depression but he never imagined that she would be slitting her wrists in the shower after having just made love with him. Lester checked her into a mental institution and their time together ended with that. Another example of his method of drawing inspiration from his love life was seen in the short romance story “Dreaming About You”. At that particular time, Lester Hardwick was dating a woman by the name of Cloris; she was somebody who mastered the ability to lucid dream every single night when she went to sleep. And oddly enough, every night that Lester went to sleep, he would meet Cloris in his dreams and together they would have conversations in his dream state almost telepathically. It was something that Lester looked forward to every evening. All throughout the daylight hours, he would be fantasizing about how he was going to meet her that night in his sleep. Even when they would depart after a date, they both knew that they would see each other again in their dreams; they never really missed each other. It was all good natured fun until Lester caught Cloris sleeping with another man in his dream one night. When he was over at her apartment the next night, he discovered that his dream became a grisly reality. Cloris had been cheating on him the whole time. It took a dream to reveal the truth.

 Despite the depressing, unfulfilled nature of Lester Hardwick’s love life, he always got a great story out of his experiences. If he had a bad date one night, it may discourage him emotionally but it enhanced him creatively. The worse the break up, the better the short stories; that was the way he operated as an artist. He would sit alone in his one bedroom apartment; a glass of beer on his bedside table, a box of tissues at his feet and tears streaming down his face as he was mourning the loss of a relationship. Eventually, Lester would swallow his pain, down his beer, get up onto his feet, walk over to his old fashioned, bohemian typewriter and hammer out the story of his lifetime. The next day he would hand off a thick stack of pages to his editor, his editor would make suggestions, Lester would go out on another date, get his heart broken, go home and rewrite the same story only better this time around. The day after that, he would hand off an even thicker stack of pages to his publisher, his publisher would read it over, fall in love with what he had written, then congratulate Lester because he had once again written the story of his lifetime and it was going in another magazine.

 It was all going so well until Lester met the love of his life. Alyssa Covello. The two of them met one very rainy afternoon in the summer. Lester was sitting in a coffee shop he often frequented called Stir Crazy. He had been in there for a number of hours, adding on the finishing touches to his new short story “Genocide of the Mind” and drinking multiple cups of black coffee. He usually took his coffee with two milk and two sugars but the more intensely he wrote, the blacker his coffee had to be. He was a man who enjoyed life intensely. As he was polishing off on the second last paragraph of the four page short story, a waitress rushed by his booth so quickly that she spilled an entire tray of beverages onto Lester’s lap. He winced in pain as the hot, steamy liquid seeped into his black pants. Filled with embarrassment and remorse, she knelt down beside Lester’s lap with a fistful of napkins.

“I am very sorry sir. Are you alright? I hope that the coffee didn’t burn you too badly,” the waitress said as she started to dab at the stain on his pants. Suddenly the burning sensation subsided and Lester’s mind began to focus on the person kneeling down beside his lap. She looked up into his eyes, awaiting a response to her question. She had a gorgeous head of dark brown hair combined with a distinct set of dark brown eyes and her name tag read: **ALYSSA** in bold, black writing.

“No, I assure you that I’m okay. Accidents happen,” Lester responded as he got up from his seat and gathered the pieces of broken glass from off the table. Every coffee mug had been destroyed in the accident and there were almost a hundred different chunks and tiny pieces of glass to pick up.

 Lester and Alyssa, in the midst of cleaning up the mess that was made in the coffee shop, struck up a casual form of conversation. In the five minutes that it took for them to tidy up, the two young people discussed novels, movies, writing and most of all the notion of being in love. It is peculiar for two complete strangers to have that depth of conversation upon first meeting, but that was the way that they carried on. As Alyssa threw out the last few pieces of broken glass, she procrastinated the action of leaving Lester’s booth and getting back to her job. She was half waiting for Lester to initiate some more formal meeting between the two of them in the future and half waiting for her shift to finish up; there was a mere three minutes left. Lester Hardwick picked his black pen from off the table, attempting to show Alyssa that was he about to get back to his writing. He then noticed that she was still standing there and he knew exactly why she was; at least he thought he did. He reached into his pants pocket, where the coffee stain was now in the middle of drying, pulled out a toonie and laid it down on the table next to his pile of papers.

“That’s for you,” he declared as he slid the coin nearer to the area where she was standing.

“Oh my, I couldn’t possibly take your money! Not after what I did to you!” Alyssa exclaimed as she slid the coin back towards the area where he was seated.

“You were a very good waitress despite the accident,” Lester once again slid the coin towards her.

 Alyssa was about to admit defeat at the hands of Lester Hardwick when an idea suddenly dawned on her. She leaned in close to Lester with a vast amount of confidence that surprised both him and her.

“Why don’t we just go out to dinner one night and we’ll call it even?”

Lester removed the coin from the table, put it back in his pocket and the very next evening he took Alyssa out to dinner.

 The two of them dined at what they agreed was the best Italian restaurant in downtown Toronto: Mario’s Joint; they served authentic Italian food not American Italian food; the two of them assured each of their friend groups that you could really taste the difference. Lester started off with a small Caesar salad followed by pasta with meatballs. Alyssa decided upon bruschetta followed by pasta with meatballs as well. For dessert, the two potential lovers each ordered a bowl of gelato. They ended their meal with a bottle of red wine shared between the two of them. Lester always felt an appropriate end to any dinner was a glass of either wine or beer.

 Afterwards they took a long walk down the street light lit Toronto, it was only a little after ten o’clock and the night still felt young. As they were casually strolling along the busy sidewalk, they passed by the used bookstore and both stopped in their tracks to look at the front window display. Alyssa turned to Lester and said:

“It’s hard to believe that in an age where people say the printed word is dead you are still able to be a writer. And a successful one at that.”

Lester, slightly caught off guard by her comment, replied with his signature sense of humor: “It’s also hard to believe that in an age of online dating and pornography you’re still planning on coming home with me tonight.”

At first she took offence to Lester’s response, but noticing the smile on his face she quickly realized it was intended as a mild joke.

“Don’t worry it was just a mild joke,” Lester said as he glanced closer at the front display.

“The delivery wasn’t very mild,” Alyssa declared as she approached the front door of the bookstore. She was the kind of girl who knew how to handle the advances of men, especially intelligent yet stupid men like Lester.

 She opened the door and stepped inside, not even offering an invitation for Lester to do the same. Realizing how that sense of humor of his wasn’t so humorous, he followed her into the bookstore. Inside the store was completely empty except for the series of shelves and the two people who had just entered. The shelves at first glance were filled with books, however with further inspection the variety of books was limited. The majority of the paperbacks and hardcovers available in the store were what critics and readers considered classic pieces of literature. One shelf was home to twenty copies of “To Kill A Mockingbird”, the shelf just below it was occupied by “The Great Gatsby” and the shelf just below that was occupied by “1984.” It was the most peculiar bookstore Alyssa and Lester had ever set foot in. The whole situation brought their evening to an abrupt halt. For one thing, it was late at night, no store employee could be found at the front desk and every piece of fiction for sale had already been read and acclaimed by half of the world’s population; it was a strange turn of events.

“Each shelf is just a bunch of copies of the exact same book, what kind of a bookstore is this?” Alyssa inquired picking up a copy of “Animal Farm”.

“That may be but at least the selection is good quality. I mean all of these books are considered classics,” Lester defended.

“They probably don’t even have my favorite book,” Alyssa said.

“Why don’t you try and find it?” Lester said as he lightly touched her hand.

“There’s no sense in that, they won’t have it. My absolute favorite book isn’t considered a classic.”

“What’s it called?”

“It’s ‘Looking for Alaska’ by John Green.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“There, you just proved my point.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

 Alyssa chuckled as Lester made his way to the other side of the store. He was looking for the owner in order to inquire about “Looking For Alaska”. His mind suddenly changed course as he came across a shelf with numerous copies of his favorite book. He picked up a dusty paperback copy and started flipping through the pages attempting to find his most beloved passage. Eventually he found it and began to recite it to himself under his breath. Lester became so immersed in this indulgent piece of literature that he almost forgot that he was on a date. Alyssa approached from behind, startling him.

“What did you find?” she asked.

“I was looking around and I happen to find my favorite novel,” Lester said as he displayed the front cover artwork before her eyes. Alyssa was surprised by what she showed him.

“Really? That’s your favorite book?” she said in disbelief as she grabbed the book out of his hands.

“Yeah, have you never read it?”

“Yes I read it in grade ten English class and I couldn’t stand it!”

“You didn’t like it?”

“Frankly Lester, I found it to be incredibly vulgar and pessimistic.”

 Lester was puzzled by Alyssa’s unexpected comment. Never on a date had he been challenged in such a way. Lester held great affection and respect for the films, music and particularly literature that he enjoyed. He longed to be a legend in the same regard as the legends he was in awe of, for a potential girlfriend to degrade his favorite novel was something he wasn’t exactly prepared for. He was somewhat hurt by how Alyssa viewed his favorite novel, if she didn’t appreciate the same fiction that he did, how could he form any kind of relationship with her? Lester’s first instinct was to raise his hand in an angry fashion and slam the book out of her hands and storm dramatically out of the bookstore, leaving her in confusion and anger as well. However, Lester was the type of person to appropriately think his actions through before he actually committed them. He knew deep in his superego that he couldn’t very well walk out on the date just because she had a different opinion than his own. Although he hated being challenged, it was the first time in a quite a while that his dates had actually been filled with some kind of substance and not just flash. Therefore, Lester initiated a polite and thoughtful conversation about their respective opinions on the piece of fiction. Eventually the reclusive owner of the bookstore appeared and informed them that he was closing in five minutes and that if they wanted to make any purchases they should do it now. The two of them examined one another’s facial expressions for an answer to the owner’s request. Neither one of them could find that answer displayed so they walked out the front door. A few days later and the bookstore went out of business; it was never to be stocked with short story volumes by Lester Hardwick as he had just gotten the word from his agent a few days earlier that such a volume was to be published. Lester knew what an accomplishment it would’ve been to have his short story collection for sale in such an overly selective store, alas it wasn’t meant to be.

Lester tried to write as soon as he dropped Alyssa off at her apartment. He always knew that writing began in the mind first before any words were typed on a blank page. He sat there driving himself a few blocks over to his apartment building, wondering whether Alyssa had gone to sleep or whether she was on Wikipedia looking up information about the novel that she hated but he adored. Lester tried his best to take his mind off of his date; he knew that she was just going to end up like the others: a girl whose only lasting impact on his life would be the creation of another short story. Although Lester did not realize how wrong he was until he lost a significant amount of sleep that night due to writer’s block. He rubbed his head constantly as he pounded random letters on the typewriter in frustration. He wondered if all great artists felt as hopeless as he did during that tragic, uncreative night he was experiencing. The thought of grabbing his hardcover copy of his favorite book from off his shelf and reading passages from it seemed to be an utter waste of time, he wanted to be focused on his writing but in reality there was nothing to focus on. Lester then began to wonder if his writing was at all misogynistic, he was afraid to let any girl read what he wrote but for some reason he felt differently about Alyssa. He had the feeling that she would love every word, every comma, every period; she would be mad about his short stories even if she despised his favorite piece of fiction. His mind drifted off to Alyssa Covello so much so that he ultimately fell into a deep but short sleep.

The next day Lester Hardwick was in his agent’s office. He sat there for what felt like hours however he had only been in the office for a mere five minutes. On his agent’s desk was a large box filled to the top with copies of *The Collected Short Stories of Lester Hardwick: Volume I.* For any upcoming writer it was an absolute dream to have the beginnings of your career collected in such an attractive series of pages, complete with a head shot of oneself on the front cover, and yet Lester didn’t feel entirely satisfied that morning. He felt overtired, disinterested and almost aggravated to be in the presence of his agent.

“Why did you call me down here Marty?” Lester asked shifting in his seat, he couldn’t get very comfortable.

Marty Freeman laughed. “Are you kidding, Lester?”

“No frankly I’m not kidding!”

“I thought you’d be more excited to sit down and talk with me. Your short story collection is being released this coming Tuesday, aren’t you ecstatic? Take a look at yourself on the front cover!” Marty pulled a copy of out the box and rudely tossed it into Lester’s hands.

Lester examined it carefully but not thoughtfully and then proceeded to set it back inside the box, still feeling unimpressed; though he could not understand why. Lester never truly understood himself in the first place.

“Boy you’ve got some attitude today,” Marty exclaimed as he dug a package of cigarettes from his pants pocket.

“I’m sorry Marty, I just didn’t get much sleep last night and I-“ Lester stopped himself.

“You what?” Marty asked as he dug a lighter out of his pants pocket.

“Nothing. It’s not important”, Lester said as he gestured towards Marty for a cigarette. He smoked only occasionally and even then he smoked just to own the classic bohemian writer look. It seemed that all the best writers were seen with ashtrays by their typewriters. Lester was prone to endless amounts of black coffee and alcohol when at work on a story but only on occasion would he fill his lungs with tobacco.

“This baby will be sold in every Canadian bookstore, and we’ve already got you booked for signings at a few of them in downtown Toronto,” Marty declared as he lit the cigarette hanging from Lester’s mouth.

Lester took a long drag. “Books are dying, Marty.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Books are dying; it’s just what I said.”

“Uh huh, and if books are dying how are you able to get published in this day and age?” Marty asked with a hint of irony.

“It’s just a damn short story collection, no one is going to give a shit,” Lester said as he took another long drag from his cigarette.

“People gave a shit when your stories were first being published in magazines didn’t they? Hell if they never gave a single shit about you then you wouldn’t be getting published!”

Marty was beginning to become irritated with Lester’s flippancy. He had worked incredibly hard to be an exceptional agent and it seemed that all of his efforts were going unappreciated. However, Marty had the capacity to be empathetic. He could understand Lester’s apprehension about finally having his writing out to a wider demographic. Marty thought that Lester feared the idea of fame.

“Lester, it’s alright to be nervous about the fame you’re going to get; but all you have to do is take it one step at a time and everything will work out,” Marty quietly said trying to make eye contact with his client.

Lester sighed. “That’s not what I’m upset about Marty.”

“Well then what’s wrong? I’m your agent, I think I have a right to know,” Marty replied as he took a drag.

“I’ve got writer’s block.”

There was a brief silence and then Marty said: “Have you been out with any girls lately?”

“I went out with one last night. I had a terrific time with her and usually I’m capable of writing something every night especially after a terrible date with a girl, but last night I just couldn’t write about anything.”

 Marty put his cigarette out in the ashtray on his desk, tipped back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling deep in thought. After a few moments, he cleared his throat and said to Lester:

“It seems to me that your secret writing device has suddenly come to a halt.”

 Lester knew exactly what his agent was referring to, his ability to write was a product of his disastrous love life. Now that he had found a girl that wasn’t so disastrous, his creativity was ultimately sapped. Lester discussed with Marty at length about this turn of events, it went on for so long that Marty grew tired of the conversation and decided to change the topic.

“On to a more positive topic of discussion, I’d you like to start working on your first novel,” Marty said as he rose out of the chair behind his desk to stretch his legs.

“A novel?” Lester asked.

“Yes, a novel; not a novella but a full length novel.”

“Marty, you must be crazy!”

“How am I being crazy?”

“I can’t write anything with the current state of my personal life, I can’t even think of another four page story! How can you expect me to deliver to you a complete novel?”

Marty sighed. “Frankly all of you writers are the same. You think you’re so damn bohemian to the point where you become pretentious and don’t write even a sentence because you have no inspiration. I’ve got news for you Lester Hardwick; you don’t just write for pleasure or self-therapy anymore. You write for a pay cheque, your food and shelter depends on your ability to write. So my suggestion to you is to wake up, stop being an artist for a few months and write a fucking book.”

 Lester Hardwick, a man who was about to spend a good portion of his time signing copies of his short story collection in bookstores, still felt no capacity to write even a week after receiving a novel assignment from his agent. Lester’s creativity was gone, there was no escaping this severe bout of writer’s block. All the while, Lester was still happily seeing Alyssa Covello. They went out three times in that week where he could not, no matter how hard he tried, write anything. Alyssa even joined Lester at one of his book signings after hearing his complaints about feeling lonely in the presence of so many strangers. She would be seated next to him on a stool slightly lower than his as he would sign autograph after autograph; never being too personal with what he wrote but always making his new fan base feel excited to have spent a few brief minutes with him. Of course, Alyssa Covello knew Lester Hardwick better than anyone else at that time. She felt slightly strange sitting there and watching Lester put on his writer persona, but that was beside the point. Alyssa felt more strange about how Lester was carrying himself on this particular night. She could instinctively tell that something was bothering him, she had an easy way of reading people’s emotions and picking up on vibrations. After the signing was over and done with, she confronted him during the drive home.

“I feel perfectly fine, Alyssa. You don’t need to worry about me,” Lester reassured her as he slowed down at a yellow traffic light.

Alyssa didn’t believe a word he said. “I know that something is wrong. You were acting differently tonight.”

“That’s how I am in public, it’s like a persona. Everybody who has any amount of fame comes across differently to their fans compared to the people in their lives.”

“No I understand that, I just wish you would let me in a little bit.”

 Lester began to ignore her as he tried to focus on driving. He even considered using this situation in the car for story material but he couldn’t make it work, writer’s block consumed him like demonic possession. He had not divulged to Alyssa about his creative predicament, it would mean sacrificing his secret weapon about the things he wrote. No matter what happened with her, he couldn’t risk that. Lester had considered ending their relationship in order to get his career back on the right path but he liked her far too much to let her go, he was even beginning to love her. Soon Lester pulled into the parking lot of Alyssa’s apartment building and she was now expected to get out of his car and forget about anything being wrong with him, but she couldn’t do that. She had to know what his problem was and how she could fix it for him. Eventually Lester caved and told her what was the matter with him.

“You have writer’s block Lester?”

“Yeah and I’ve got it pretty bad.”

“I didn’t think that creative people ever ran out of creativity.”

“Well sometimes they do Alyssa. There’s so much you don’t know about writing. It’s very hard work.”

Alyssa thought for a moment and then she said: “Is it the actual writing that you find hard or just people’s expectations of you to write?”

“I guess it’s both. I’m not entirely sure,” Lester said as he played with his car keys between his fingers.

“Why don’t you write about this?” Alyssa laughed.

“About what?”

“Write a story about a character that has a terrible case of writer’s block!”

Lester dismissed her idea by sticking his tongue out.

“Don’t dismiss it like that. I’m trying to help you!” Alyssa exclaimed.

Lester decided that he had had enough of her for one evening. He reached across her lap and swung open her door.

“Just go to bed okay? I’ll call you tomorrow,” Lester slightly whispered as he put his keys in the ignition.

Alyssa slammed the car door violently and looked over at Lester as furiously as she could make herself look.

“You can’t just toss me aside like that. All I want to do is help you but you’re just brushing me off, telling me not to worry about it. Well guess what, I’m in love with you Lester Hardwick and I want you to be successful and I want you to feel that you’re a good writer. You may have difficulty with writing a decent story right now but you’ll overcome it. You’ll find a way!”

 Another week passed by and Lester had still not overcome his writer’s block. He knew that he wouldn’t until he broke up with Alyssa Covello but he still couldn’t bring himself to do it. He pictured married life with Alyssa, out of all the girls he had gone out she was the one he could see himself settling down with. Lester imagined married life with her as being mostly joyful and fulfilling but he also imagined himself as feeling resentful towards her. He had given up the chance to become a legendary writer for a woman. Others may have found it romantic but Lester didn’t. He found the very notion to be depressing. His outlandish imagination came to a surprising reality one night when he was having his weekly dinner with Alyssa.

“Lester, I think we ought to get married,” Alyssa said as she put a spoonful of mushroom soup into her mouth.

Lester nearly choked on his own mushroom soup when she made that daring comment. “You want us to get married?”

“Yes, why not? We get along very well, we’re not getting any younger and we both have common interests. What else do we need?” Alyssa said as she nodded her head to each point she had.

“Alyssa, we’ve only known each other for two weeks. Some people wait over ten years to marry a person. It’s a big commitment and one that I don’t think either one of us is ready for,” Lester explained as he put his knife and fork down beside his plate.

“But Lester, I’m in love with you. Don’t you feel the same way about me?” Alyssa asked in the most serious tone of voice Lester had ever heard from her.

 The date ended after that more than awkward conversation. Alyssa stormed out of the restaurant when Lester didn’t answer her question right away. Lester opted not to take a cab tonight and instead decided to walk back to his apartment after having such a dramatic evening. He thought about the irony of his situation. He was giving up his chance to become a respectable writer of novels for a girl who he had only met two weeks ago and was already prepared to settle down and get married. Lester Hardwick was trading his creative freedom for a prison cell called marriage. On his way home he encountered a man, a woman and a small child all walking down the street towards him hand in hand. At first Lester was struck by the notion that these two parents would be out in the city with their child at such a late hour, but then he was suddenly struck by something else. The three of them together seemed genuinely euphoric and optimistic; they presented themselves as a family that was ready to take on anything that the world could throw at them. The man was smiling from ear to ear as his wife was laughing hysterically at the faces their young son was making as he was struggling to keep up with the two adults. It was like looking at a painting or watching an emotionally moving scene from a film. That was when an idea for a first novel was born. Lester felt lighter than air in that moment when that unbearable cloud of writer’s block disappeared. And with that, he ran home as fast as he could and began to write.

 Lester Hardwick’s first novel, consisting of two hundred forty pages, was published five months later with the help of his agent Marty Freeman. The name of the novel was “Direction to the Better Life”, it told the story of a man who puts his job on the line in order to provide happiness and optimism to his wife and four year old son. Lester felt utterly inspired after seeing what he saw that night after Alyssa ended the date abruptly. It was then that our dear friend Lester Hardwick realized that he didn’t need any failed romantic relationship to create exceptional writing. In fact he didn’t need any sort of magical techniques at all, to be inspired all he had to do was look at everyday life and realize the beauty that comes along with the mundane. And in case you were left wondering, Lester continued his relationship with Alyssa Covello and a year later they were married. Eventually Alyssa got around to reading Lester’s favorite book. She read it three more times actually because she grew to love it as much as he did, and for Lester that made the whole marriage worth it.