

2-26-2015

Market Value

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DOI: 10.25148/etd.FI15032120

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

MARKET VALUE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Christine Morando

2015

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Christine Morando, and entitled Market Value, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Ana Luszczynska

Julie Wade

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: February 26, 2015

The thesis of Christine Morando is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

MARKET VALUE

by

Christine Morando

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

MARKET VALUE is a collection of stories about people in Southwest Florida struggling to make sense of their lives when faced with shifting economic realities.

The characters in the collection reevaluate their relationships and uncover secrets, forced to navigate a new American landscape of stalled opportunities and uncertain futures. In “Call the Storage King,” Walt assumes that his girlfriend has total faith in their relationship, but accidentally discovers evidence to the contrary. In “Luxury Living,” a resident of a mostly-empty riverfront condo gives a guided tour to a prospective buyer, revealing the building’s short but sordid history along the way.

Influenced by the suburban satire of Tom Perotta and A.M. Homes, MARKET VALUE presents a changing landscape where characters form unexpected alliances and sever old ties, in order to come closer to their downsized American Dreams.

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MERRY AND BRIGHT

I was in second grade the year my dad left. That happened in September, a couple of weeks before we were set to move out of our house and into an apartment. The move had seemed like a normal enough plan at first. I wasn't trained to be worried yet. Later that year kids all over school would be moving away or into smaller places, and once in a while we'd even find out someone's lights or shower didn't work at home. For whatever reason, even though I had no idea where he was, I had this deep certainty that my father would come back for us. I just didn't know when.

At the house we'd had a garage and our own separate bedrooms and closets. Space for ourselves and for our things. So much of both seemed to disappear in the new place. Instead of the two-bedroom my mom had shown me after school one day the month before, we moved into a one-bedroom, and she slept on the couch.

She got a new job, and kept it a secret for a while. The only reason I found out why I was spending three nights a week with a babysitter was that Meagan got a flat tire on her way from her class at the local community college to the apartment one night and I had to ride downtown with my mother and sit in the ticket booth of the municipal garage with her until Megan could come pick me up.

Spending that evening in the booth with Mom was great. It was just the two of us, and I felt official and important. Cars came through occasionally. Mostly we sat, me in her lap reading a Star Wars book she'd brought along. Now and then she would ruffle my hair with her fingers and kiss the back of my head.

It was the next morning, when she was helping me slip on my backpack before school, that she told me not to let anyone else know about the job.

“Why can’t I tell my friends?” I asked. “I liked it there.”

“Some people think mommies shouldn’t have two jobs,” she told me. “Just keep it to yourself.” She ruffled my hair again, like she had at the garage, and walked me to my bus stop.

* * *

At Sunday school that fall Ms. Sheila told us that Joseph wasn’t really Jesus’s dad, but that he really loved Mary and loved God, and so he protected Jesus like a dad would. This kid Scotty Pearson raised his hand and said that was called a stepdad and that he had one too, but his name was Carl.

During Advent, Father Patrick came to our class to talk to us more about Christmas and Jesus and let us ask questions. I remember being disappointed that Father had changed out of the robes he wore during Mass. His plain black clothes were boring.

“When Jesus was little,” Father Patrick said, “Joseph was like his dad. He took care of Jesus and Mary and kept them safe, just like your dads do.”

“My friend Maddie at school doesn’t have a dad,” one of the boys said. “Not even a part-time one like Joseph.”

“Well,” Father said, “it’s important for boys and girls to have a mommy and a daddy, but sometimes that doesn’t work. Jesus looks over all of us though, since he died for us, and he can protect Maddie and keep her safe.”

“So Jesus is like everyone’s dad?” another girl asked.

Father smiled. “Something like that. Except he’s even more powerful than your daddies who take such good care of you.”

I had no idea what he meant. Scotty had told me that Carl yelled at him a lot and I hadn’t seen my father in three months.

* * *

I had been worried about Christmas since we moved into the new apartment. We had an artificial Christmas tree that Mom had picked out when I was five. Before she bought it we’d had another fake tree, a dinky thing, and she was excited to show me the new one and pull it out of the box to decorate it. I loved it as much as she did, and I asked her to read the harder words on the side of the box to me. For weeks I proudly told everyone I saw all about our SIX FOOT ALBERTA SPRUCE.

Mom couldn’t fit the tree in either of the closets at the new apartment. It sat in its box against the wall in the living room. We’d already spent so long weeding out before the move. For weeks before my father left, Mom grabbed everything she thought we didn’t need anymore and loaded it in garbage bags to take to Goodwill. She helped me go through my clothes and my toys, finding things to get rid of, too.

Once he was gone, she did it again, more frantically this time since we had to be out of the house so soon. She held onto some of his things, but we had so little room. We got rid of more of the furniture. We kept the dresser from my room, where she put what was left of my clothes. The bedroom closet at the new apartment was for Mom, and she filled it with her clothes and shoes, along with boxes of pictures and important paperwork. I would pull the pictures out sometimes and look at images of my mother and father without me, before me.

She thought there would be room for the tree in the walk-in closet by the front door. When there wasn't, she left it sitting right where it was, taking up precious space in the entryway. I don't think she could bear to give it up.

When she finally opened up the box after Thanksgiving, she began to put it up just as she had in the past. She pulled back the plain white sheet she wrapped the pieces of the tree in, shaping the scratchy plastic branches one at a time before hanging them from the metal stand. When the tree was fully formed, but bare, the differences between our old life and new were clear again. At the house, my mother would string lights around the tree, calling in my father when it was time to wrap the last branches at the top and add the star. After that they would let me help. I was nearby already, spying on the work until I was allowed to step in. My father would hold me up, one arm around my waist and another around my knees, and I would wiggle the star's metal coil over the top branch and drop back to the floor with my hands covered in glitter.

Our last Christmas together at the old house I'd spied on them before they called for me, creeping out from the hallway to sneak peeks as they strung the lights at the top of the tree.

"You need to space the strands out more," I remember my mother saying. "Look at the way I did the lower branches and try to copy that."

My father sighed. "It's a damn tree, relax."

"You told me you wanted to help," Mom said. "Just go. I can stand on a chair and do it myself."

Despite her offer, my father continued his work. Neither of them spoke until he'd finished. My mother took a deep breath in, letting it out in a shaky puff. "Wyatt," she called. "It's time for the star."

I backed up a few feet so I was completely out of view and waited a moment before I ran out of the hallway so they wouldn't know I'd been watching.

"Come here," my father said, when I came around the corner. I hopped over to him, and he scooped me off the ground and held me in the air. My mother handed me the star and I slipped it onto the top branch.

"Good job, kid," he said, setting me back down. Then he walked out of the room.

My mother was on her hands and knees beneath the tree, searching for the electrical socket so she could plug in the strand of lights.

"We need to make it really beautiful," she'd said as she climbed back out. "So Daddy can see how hard we worked." It did turn out beautiful. I couldn't understand why he'd left us.