

“My Story”

by Sophie Katz

The hero runs past me on his way to stop the love of his life from getting on a plane. He comes rushing around the corner, his eyes wild and his hair a mess, wearing clothes he very obviously had thrown on at the last minute. He comes within inches of me, nearly knocking me over as he continues on his desperate quest to declare his love for the girl who had dumped him three chapters previously before she left the country and his life forever, just like he does every time someone reads our book.

Even though I know exactly where and when he runs by, I stare at him, wide-eyed and startled, as he passes me. That’s what the book says I do, how I’m described to the reader in a single line of text: *I nearly run into a woman who stares at me with wide eyes, startled by my mad dash down the hall.*

That’s it. That’s where I appear in the book. That’s what I do every single time someone reads us. Then I just stand here and wait for another reading, for the story to happen again. It’s not like I have anywhere to go. I know that there’s a world beyond this patch of floor in an airport hallway (the hero comes running in from somewhere, after all) but I’ve never been there. I’m just a detail, a piece of scenery. I am defined by that one line of text, made to stand and stare, wide-eyed and startled, at the first-person protagonist.

The hero sprints off down the hall towards the airplane gates, the reader hovering over his shoulder, an invisible presence vicariously experiencing our literary world through the hero’s eyes. If I try hard enough, I can sense the reader’s emotion, like a faint scent in the air (not that I’ve ever smelled anything, of course, or felt anything for that matter. Only the hero, the first-person protagonist, gets sensory description.) This reader is very involved in the story; I can

practically hear him egging the hero on down the hall. He's probably a hopeless romantic. You'd have to be a hopeless romantic to enjoy our book.

You see, although I never leave this one patch of airport floor, every once in a while bits of plot break loose and float my way, so I know more or less what happens in the rest of the book. It's a very cliché young-adult romance: boy meets girl, boy is an ass to girl, girl catches guy cheating on her, girl leaves boy, boy realizes he still wants girl, boy declares love for girl in an overly dramatic fashion, girl falls into his arms, and they all live happily ever after.

Personally, I don't think that this is the kind of message we should be giving young people.

("Did you cheat on a girl? Forget calling, texting, or email; run through a busy airport! She's bound to forget all your transgressions and stay with you forever!") I think the hero should get slapped for saying that it's the girl's "time of month" when she snaps at him for touching her butt in Chapter Four. I think our story is misogynistic and that it ends in a completely unrealistic way. I think the first-person protagonist is a self-centered jerk, and our book needs a complete rewrite. (If not a rewrite, then a re-label—we really belong more on the satire shelf than here in the romance section. The problem is, people actually take our plot *seriously*.)

But no one cares what I think, and I guess it doesn't really affect me. People buy the book; we get read.

Actually, let me rephrase that: the *hero* gets read. I get mentioned.

Because the hero is a first-person protagonist, he carries the narrative with him wherever he goes, draped over his shoulders like a light jacket. The narrative is everything for a story: what happens, where and when it happens, and what the world feels like as it happens. I'm not important enough to carry any narrative, so when the hero isn't around, nothing happens in my little patch of airport. The world around me goes flat and lifeless. The other minor characters

(who didn't have a lot of detail to begin with, never being described as anything more than "a crowd of people") lose their color and fade away. I assume I fade, too, but it's hard to tell when there's nothing around to judge my own existence by. Without the narrative, there are no sights or sounds, and no occurrences at all, not even insignificant ones. I just wait for the hero to run by again, so that I can stare at him, startled.

Those bits of plot I mentioned before, fragments of story, are breaths of air in a vacuum, Even though my opinion of our book isn't exactly a review that a publisher would want to put on our back cover, a glimpse at anything, any detail at all, any sense of purpose is better than the emptiness of waiting for a scene that, in the end, doesn't really matter.

Sometimes, I think that I might as well not exist at all. No one would notice if I weren't there. Who remembers that startled woman in the airport? All the attention in the climactic airport scene is on our hero, the desperate lover, the almighty first-person protagonist. No reader ever even looks at me. Most skim my line. I am utterly irrelevant.

The thing is, I don't have a way out. As I said before, I have nowhere to go. There's nothing for me except this patch of airport. The author didn't give me any description or backstory, not even a name.

But sometimes I imagine that there's more to me than what the reader sees, that I don't just fade away when the protagonist isn't around. Sometimes, when everything's quiet and colorless, I make up my story.

In my story, my name is Jane, and I am twenty-one years old. I'm hoping to graduate with a bachelor's degree in psychology at the end of the next school year. I came to the airport to say good-bye to my best friend, Sonia, who just got on a plane to spend her summer studying abroad in China. My favorite color is the shade of sky blue that sits just above the horizon on a

cloudless summer day. A boy broke my heart in eighth grade and it took me until my junior year of high school to trust my heart in someone else's hands again, and even though I haven't met my true love yet, I love the excitement of not yet knowing who he is. I have thick, dark brown hair that cascades down my back (or maybe I have curly ginger hair; I can't decide which I like more. Either way, Sonia would spend hours in our dorm room trying in vain to style it. It's too stubborn to stay in anything other than a ponytail.) When I sit and chat with my father, I laugh at all of his jokes, even though I've heard them a thousand times before, because I love to hear him talk. My eyes are hazel, just like my mother's. I enjoy taking long walks, sometimes with a friend or family member but often on my own, and thinking about life.

I would give anything for a single word of that story to be true. I would give anything to be able to do something other than stand and stare, as the narrative dictates I must. I would give anything to see the world that lies beyond the airport, to hear, smell, and feel everything that here is to experience. I would give anything to experience the world through myself, rather than secondhand.

I would give anything, but I have nothing to give.

To summarize: I'm in a terrible book, my existence has no real relevance to it at all, and when I'm not being utterly irrelevant, I barely exist at all.

To summarize even more: Everything sucks.

Ahead of me, the world begins to regain color and shape. Another reading, so soon? I watch the crowd of people appear and start to walk on their predetermined paths. The hero appears around the corner, as unkempt as ever, the usual expression of desperation on his face. But as I prepare to look surprised, I suddenly sense the reader.

There's something different about this reader. She isn't focused on the hero. How is that possible? Our story is told in the first-person; the reader has no choice but to see things from the hero's point of view. But this reader, strangely, is practically radiating indifference. She's looking everywhere but at the hero. She doesn't care if he succeeds. In fact, I realize as I try even harder to sense her emotions, she doesn't *want* him to succeed. She thinks the plot is misogynistic and completely unrealistic, *just like I do*.

The hero runs past me, and the world around me slows for a moment as the reader's eyes linger on *me*.

*She notices me.*

Before I know what I'm doing, I step off of my patch of airport floor, hold out a hand to block the hero's path, and say, "Stop."

He falters, confused. "What?"

"Stop," I say again. "Just stop. Seriously, man, just give it a rest. Let the girl go."

"But... but..." he stammers, his eyes flickering between me and the distant airport gates.

"But I have to—"

"No, you don't," I say. "She'll be infinitely happier without you. Maybe she'll find a guy who understands that she has feelings, who won't cheat on her. Or maybe she won't. Maybe she'll find fulfillment in herself. One thing's for sure: she won't find fulfillment with *you*. You were a complete asshole to her. Why should she go back to you?"

"Besides," I continue, "if you really want her back, this isn't the way to do it. I mean, chasing her through an airport? Seriously? If this story had an ounce of reality, you wouldn't have even gotten through security. But regardless, the dramatic romantic gesture only proves that you're stupid enough to do a stunt like this, something that in the real world would get you

arrested. If you want to prove to her that you've changed, start by calling or emailing her and apologizing. Then see if she'll be willing to talk to you. To be frank, though, you haven't changed. You haven't learned to treat that girl like she's a human being; you've just decided that you want her. You don't have the right to pull her back into your life just because you want her.

“Well, do you know what I want? I want to see what's outside this airport. I want to hear birdsong and feel sunlight on my face. I want to take long walks and think about life, or maybe walk with someone, talk to them, get to know them. I don't want dramatic gestures. I want to experience the world, the normal, ordinary, boring world. I want to *live*.”

The hero opens his mouth to speak and then closes it again, blinking at me dumbly. The reader is watching me avidly, and her interest gives me even more confidence—enough confidence to do something even more reckless than I already have.

I reach out, take the narrative from him, and put it on. It fits loosely, but I know I'll grow into it. I'm the protagonist now.

The world around me comes sharply into focus. There are gray lines between the white tiles on the floor. The air is cold against my skin; I can hear the hum of the air conditioner, a low thrumming under the thumping of hurried footsteps and the clickety-clack of suitcases rolling over the tiles. I inhale through my nose, and I smell the greasy output of the fast food joints down the hall. I shift my weight from one foot to the other, and my shoes squeak. A woman walks quickly by, pushing a stroller with a little girl strapped inside; I wave at the toddler, and she smiles at me.

I want to laugh, shout, or possibly even cry. I can feel. I can do things. I *matter*.

The protagonist—ex-protagonist, I remind myself—is still standing in front of me, a look of confusion frozen on his face, his eyes blank and unfocused. He doesn't have any motivation

anymore, not an ounce of drive. I have taken his purpose away. Now he's just a detail, a detail in *my* story.

“See you next reading,” I say to him, cheerfully. I've never said anything cheerfully before. Heck, until today, I've never said *anything* before!

I turn and walk down the hallway, away from the patch of floor that I have stood on for my entire existence, away from the boy whose life once dictated my own. I walk through the busy airport, leaving the gates behind me. All around me are people, people of all sizes and colors, walking slowly and quickly, sitting and reading or listening to music, smiling and frowning and living. They are so incredibly varied and detailed, I couldn't possibly describe them all. They are going places; they are living their lives, as I now can, as well.

I head out through security, and with every step I feel the joy of being free to move. I could go anywhere. I could do anything. I could visit my parents or call Sonia. I could find true love. The possibilities are endless, and no one, not even some self-possessed jerk of a first-person protagonist, can hold me back now.

Eventually, I reach the exit. The tall glass doors of the airport tower in front of me. Outside, it's a sunny afternoon, and cars are rushing by. As I place my hands on the door handle, I can feel the reader hovering over my shoulder. I can sense her confusion and curiosity. Her interest is piqued; she wants to know what's going to happen next.

“Let's find out together,” I say, and then I open the door and step outside.