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The Short Story

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The Lost Art of Love

According to Susan Page, a writer specializing in making relationships work, “The quality of communication in a relationship is a decisive factor in whether it is able to thrive” (26). The lack of communication, what Page deems “essential” in a relationship, is only one of the aspects in the art of love that dooms the relationships in T. Coraghessan Boyle’s “Carnal Knowledge” and in Bobbie Mason’s “Shiloh.” In addition to the lack of communication between the two couples, the characters’ need for finding their own identities, and the premise on which each relationship has been built all show that the characters are “lost” when it comes to love.

In “Carnal Knowledge”, the two main characters, Jim and Alena, have no form of true communication in their so-called relationship. Many of Jim’s thoughts (contrary to what he tells Alena) show us that he is craving meat and really could care less about freeing turkeys or if people wear fur. However, he concocts lies which he tells to Alena, and is very dishonest about his true thoughts and feelings. Although it may appear on the surface that Jim is the only one not communicating freely, Alena is, in a way, using Jim just as he is using her. She wants somebody to be on her side of the spectrum, someone to walk beside her in her animal rights crusade. In one of their first conversations, Alena says to Jim, “But listen, I’m sorry if I talked your head off - I didn’t mean to, but it’s rare to find somebody on your own wavelength” (280). Jim is, of course, not on the same wavelength as Alena, but this moment of praise is enough to keep him

playing the part. Having built their “relationship” on nothing but lies and dishonesty, it was eminently doomed to failure.

This enemy of modern day love - lack of communication - is also evident in “Shiloh” between Leroy and Norma Jean. Because of a leg injury, Leroy has been collecting disability and is at home every day. Since he has always been out on the road during his marriage to Norma Jean, this is something new for both of them, and they soon begin to realize that they don’t have much of a connection anymore - or maybe they never did to begin with. We read, “As he and Norma Jean work together at the kitchen table, Leroy has the hopeful thought that they are sharing something, but he knows he is a fool to think this. Norma Jean is miles away” (1130). Leroy is constantly trying to find a connection between himself and Norma Jean, but always fails to do so. Although he thinks of ways he could rekindle their relationship, he never once talks to Norma Jean or acts on any of his ideas. As the narrator notes, “They have known each other so long they have forgotten a lot about each other” (1128-1129).

In both “Carnal Knowledge” and “Shiloh” we see two of the main characters desperately searching for their own identity. In “Carnal Knowledge,” Jim is unsure of who he really is and where his life is going. Sure, he may have a normal life but he tells us “And then, if I was lucky, I’d go out to a singles bar and make the acquaintance of a divorced programmer in her mid-thirties with three kids and bad breath” (278). Jim lacks anything solid in his life and this is what he is seemingly in search of. When he gets his first glimpse of Alena at the beach, “bare-legged, fluid, as tall and uncompromising as her Nordic ancestors, and dressed in a Gore-Tex bikini and hooded sweatshirt unzipped to the waist, she blew me away” (277), it is easy for him to believe that this is everything he is missing in his life. He goes along with her every move, trying to convince himself that he feels the same conviction as Alena towards meat and animal rights. Jim

Works Cited

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