

The First Two Pages: “Travels for the Traditional Man” by Lisbeth Mizula
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An Essay By Lisbeth Mizula

“I couldn’t stop myself” is the first sentence in my short story “Travels for the Traditional Man.” It’s also what happens every time before every crime: a criminal can’t stop themselves.

By the end of page two, I hope the reader is now considering the possibility over-the-top cheerfulness can become a weapon. Which is why this story is included in a mystery anthology and not in one of those inspirational *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books.

In the first paragraph, we see Carol Lynn’s unrelenting cheerfulness as well as what she values in life:

“Oh, boy, we’re going on a car trip!” I clapped my hands as Greg jammed his key into the ignition. The baby, Jonathon, the orange and white kitty I inherited when my mother died, was in his cat carrier belted onto the backseat of the car. Our clothes, the diary mother left me, and Jonathon’s kibble and scratching post were all packed neatly into suitcases in the trunk...

No mention is made of jewelry, books, or photographs, only the diary left her by her mother and the cat’s scratching post. There is no mention of people food, only the cat’s kibble. Originally, I’d written “cat carrier belted *securely* onto the backseat...” I regret losing that one word.

The protagonist's positive internalizations were a problem for a writer friend who saw an earlier version of this story. I chose to keep them with the intent to show she's a *what you see is what you get* kind of woman. She is never divorced from her "Happy Fool" character.

Greg gave me a sweet grunt and kept his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel, his head faced directly toward the road ahead. I'd never seen a safer driver!

Carol Lynn affirms Greg. She talks to him, watches him, compliments him. Until Greg is standing at the point of his destination, all he gives her is a grunt and a grumble. Greg drove the car, but Carol Lynn is the ultimate driver on this journey.

Next, we come to the paragraph telling how these two people came to be sitting in this car together today. Carol Lynn says:

"There's never been a more perfect day. Except maybe for the day we met at that dating website, Men Lead Women Follow. For the traditional man. That's you."

Carol Lynn intentionally signed up at a website called Men Lead Women Follow. I hope this puts questions in the mind of the reader: Why that site? Why not just online dating?

There are moments when the amount of energy Carol Lynn spends complimenting Greg may make the reader feel she's jumped into the pool of the ridiculous:

“You parked with the precision of a cake decorator. There’s so much room between us and the other car. I couldn’t hit their car with my door if I tried. Not that I would, or could, ever even think of causing damage to another person’s property.” Once out, I swung the door back and forth, marveling at all the available space, then turned to make sure Greg could see all the room he’d allowed for my side of the car.

By the end of page two I want the reader to be thinking the star of our story is a gentle spirit, an animal lover, a woman possessed with a singleness of purpose and that that purpose is made clear.

I wanted to write a story about a different kind of travel. And because comedy is my favorite subgenre, it had to be a story that brings a chuckle or a smile.

Thank you for reading.

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Lisbeth Mizula, happy Guppy and member of SINC, has written and performed her own stand-up comedy material, published short fiction in local and national publications, and collected wins in writing contests. She has a horror/romance novella in the editing stage and is currently working on a humorous mystery set in Good Deeds, Texas—the small bay town where good deeds are legally required of all residents every Tuesday, the only acceptable excuses being jail, institutions, or death. Lisbeth lives with her husband, brother, and a dog named Noodle.