

LOVE Park

A Novel

by Jim Zervanos

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Nice Greek Girl

At twenty-one, I believed I was going to write a book that would immortalize Philadelphia. I thought of my hometown as a museum without walls, harboring future relics—the sky-blue buildings reaching ever higher into the clouds, the Art Museum, another artifact, atop the city’s own Acropolis, the boulevard leading to LOVE Park, fountains gushing pink water before City Hall’s blunt, pale tower. The opening line came to me just as Dorothy Maloney snapped a picture of the two of us, author and photographer, posing for the dustcover, side by side at the base of the LOVE sculpture, bound together for eternity. This is love, I thought. Then: *This is LOVE*.

I had met Dorothy Maloney in an Eastern Religion seminar our junior year at Temple University, just after she’d vowed to purify herself by abstaining from alcohol, drugs, and sex. She was *re-virginizing*, she explained to me, and I sympathized with her spiritual crisis. I was picking up a Religion minor in hopes of making my Greek Orthodoxy seem an informed choice, not just something I was born into. Each of us felt safe dry-humping incessantly, without fear of the other’s expectations. As she saw it, she was abstaining; as I saw it, I was enjoying a virtual sex life. She envied my apparent detachment from the need to have intercourse and told me how she admired my restraint and trusted my discipline. I made sure to wear shirts long enough to hide the proof that she overestimated me.

As a kid I’d had my heart set on Tori Williams, who used to tease and call me virgin, either predicting my permanent sexual state or offering to put an end to it, I was

never sure, though for a long time I imagined she'd be my first. I liked that I was the priest's son while she was the WASPy girl from around the block who had a backyard pool and looked great in her pink bikini. Almost as great as her older sister, Bridget, whose looks won her a contract with a suntan-lotion company and with whom my big brother got naked under an afghan right on the living-room couch at least once before she took off for California. I'd run in through the kitchen and frozen at the sight of Andrew's pale ribs and her golden thighs sunken into red leather cushions. While my brother moved obliviously above her, Bridget curled her arm above her head and smiled at me, her legs tangled in a red-white-and-blue crocheted blanket.

At sixteen, in my newly purchased pickup, I was driving Tori home from McDonald's the day she opened the Velcro fly of my bathing suit and, for about three fantastic seconds, rubbed me through my damp, chlorinated briefs. When at first she saw my underwear and asked why I wore it under my bathing suit, I shrugged, never having considered going without it. Mercifully, she didn't ask about my subsequent flinching. I sealed up my surfer shorts, trying to appear cool, though tiny explosions were going off even as I entered her driveway.

During the next two years, my condition, or affliction—disability? *curse?*—was confirmed and, as far I knew, kept secret from the ranks at Plymouth High School, thanks to insufficient lighting and my own practiced non-reaction. As a junior at a youth-group retreat in the woods along the Susquehanna, I shuddered discreetly in a pair of thick blue camper shorts when Stella Mavroutsis, as if hefting melons, clenched my buttocks only seconds after our lips had met. As a senior I found myself still inept, this time in a dark-brown suit at the Homecoming dance, in the shadows of the lockers, kissing the

Mennonite girl, Donna Fisher, who I'd assumed was inexperienced, until she plunged her tongue into my ear and grabbed my crotch.

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At twenty-six, another summer spread out before me, I broke out a small stack of blank note cards and finally wrote those three words down. *This is LOVE*. Day after day I carried that stack, secured with a rubber band, in the big front pocket of the army shorts I wore while painting the interiors of empty apartments white.

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On the third Saturday in June, my father came down to the basement to wake me up. Every weekday for the past five years I'd been waking up at six—before anyone else—and painting houses till dusk, yet on Saturday mornings my father, the priest playing Domestic Dad, still wanted me to play apprentice, to steady the dowel rods while he tied the tomato vines, to pull back the thorny rose branches while he reached for weeds, to follow with a broom while he groomed the hemlocks along the walkway. The basement walls almost completely muted the distant buzz of the lawn mower, but my father's heavy footfalls across the kitchen floor achieved their purpose, penetrating my cocoon. It wasn't until the old man sat down on the bed that I anticipated hearing some sacred father-to-son speech, instead of a list of chores. When your priest-father tells you it's time you started dating and found your own place, it's official: your life has become

a joke. You might even consider taking his advice for once. “A nice Greek girl...your own apartment...a job you can be proud of...” It must have pained the old man to say these things to his grown son. “You’ve got the whole summer. Enough is enough.”

The next Saturday, when I finally tackled the stairs up to the kitchen, my mother announced I’d risen just in time for lamb sandwiches on the good rolls. Instead, I stepped onto the back patio, still in pajama bottoms, cradling a bowl of Lucky Charms, while my father trudged across the lawn in old Nikes, gripping a bursting Hefty bag in each fist and glaring at me: *Why do you still eat that stuff?* He’d told my mother not to buy the fruity-marshmallow junk anymore, so I’d gone to the grocery store myself and paid nearly five bucks for the small box.

Making her way across the final strip of uncut grass, my sister, Sophia, tipped the Toro onto its hind wheels and glowered at me, reminding me that this was the last time she’d be mowing this lawn. I couldn’t believe she was really leaving tomorrow, off to California—just out of high school and already a woman. Tomorrow she would be gone, and I would be home alone—with my parents, my uncle, and my grandmother—twenty-six years old and asserting my independence by going to the Acme to buy my own Lucky Charms and Tastykakes.

Not even an hour later, I was staring at the red glow of the traffic light two blocks from home, having just picked up four cases of soda and beer for the name-day party that night. Sitting there, I thought, I’m still running errands like a teenager, and then: *Forget about Dorothy Maloney.* Thinking of Dorothy always made me feel not just sad but ashamed, not because I’d allowed my inadequacy to seem like abstinence, not even because I’d turned her down the night before graduation when she asked me once and for

all to go south with her to some kind of commune, but because I'd never had the guts to bring her home to meet my parents.

The light turned to green, and I turned left into my neighborhood, and left again onto Birch Hill. Even up here, the pollen-sticky air, through the window of my pickup, smelled of cut grass. I would wear a smile for the party, I decided, but secretly I'd be packing. Enough *was* enough. I was already imagining myself lounging poolside at Stone Bridge Apartments, where for the last five years I'd been rolling fresh coats of paint for the incoming tenants.

I swore to God right then and there: this summer I was going to change my life, come hell or high water. As it turned out, it would take Him less than a week to make it clear that He had heard me.

I slammed the brakes and gasped when Freddy West, at first a blur of denim and tie-dyed T-shirt, shot out from his driveway and barreled down the hill on his skateboard. The weekend before, the kid, while hammering two-by-fours in his yard, had explained to me how he wasn't allowed to take the center-city train to LOVE Park anymore, because his parents had heard the cops were cracking down on skateboarders ruining the sidewalks and steps. "That stinks," I'd offered. In high school, I, too, had gone to LOVE Park now and then, though I'd never amounted to much of a skateboarder. Still, I missed those days. "Whatever," Freddy had said, and I'd admired his indifference. Now, I admired his initiative: against the Wests' garage door, a wooden ramp—an upraised, bright-yellow plank, bordered with giant silver nail heads—was shining in the sun. I exhaled, finally, as Freddy, with knees bent and hands out

surfer-style, swooped and disappeared at the bottom of the hill, where the road came to a T at our freshly mown front yard.

All of a sudden my engine died, just as I spotted my family gathering on the driveway down below. I loved my truck, which I'd bought in high school with lawn money. The engine restarted, no problem. Still, I pictured my truck sputtering into the driveway and dying once and for all behind my brother's red Porsche. I pressed the gas gingerly and lingered at the top of the hill.

My brother was offering our father the keys to a new green car—evidently Andrew's latest toy. The old man seemed to be declining a test drive, hands folded and head bowed, faithful to his old black Nissan, which was usually—as it was now—awaiting new parts at the local Exxon service station. When Melanie, Andrew's girlfriend, facing the waxy hood, pointed toward the rear of the car, the old man stepped around back, as if to inspect the bumper. Melanie clapped, while my mother rushed from the grass to see what the fuss was about. A bumper sticker? All the while, Sophia couldn't have cared less, hosing down the mower, her back to everyone.

I was too far away to see anyone's expression, but I could imagine the scene: Andrew hoping for a pat on the back from the old man, who was contemplating how a priest should respond to such extravagance, not to mention a priest who was determined to drive his old Nissan over the two-hundred-thousand-mile mark; Melanie silently urging the old man to go ahead, pat Andrew on the back, despite the ethical implications of endorsing the purchase of a second luxury car; my mother, torn, beaming proudly, offering an ambiguous "Oh, Andrew," while trying to shake the thought of tithing, reminding herself that as a doctor Andrew gave much more than ten percent of himself to

people every day; and Sophia, her boots stained green, listening to our brother's chatter—anti-lock brakes, side air bags, satellite tracking system, Such-and-Such sound system—wanting to turn the water gun on all of them, angry for having spent the last four hours mowing this goddamn three-acre yard, angrier for having to wash a lawn mower.

Halfway down Birch Hill, tucked on the right side of the street in the shade of overhanging pine branches, a dark-haired woman hunched at the steering wheel of a maroon Chevrolet. Drifting, pulling alongside, I leaned over, cranked down the passenger window, and heard the familiar plucky whine of *bouzouki* music seeping out through the sealed windows. Verifying the woman's Greekness was a laminated postcard-sized icon of a distinctly Byzantine Jesus tucked into the near corner of the dashboard. When the woman glanced up from the purse on her lap, I was struck by her dark beauty, the severe, shadowy angles of her eyes and nose, the bulk of hair that fell, suddenly, over her face. I thought I recognized her from church, though I hadn't been there in years.

After a moment her door opened, and I backed up to make room. Engine problems? We had something in common. She took a step toward me and hesitated, her eyes aimed on me in a deadly squint. It was only when her hand rose to block the sun that I realized she couldn't see me through the glare on the windshield. Her apologetic, closed-lipped smile vanished as she turned toward the front of the car, her red heels clicking on the pavement, her dress, white with red polka dots, flirting just below her knees. Nice Greek girl, I thought. If she turned out to be a second cousin or a distant aunt, I'd pay for my gawking.