

Meadow Valley Dollhouse Competition

By: Kristy Ellington

INT. GARAGE WORKSHOP – EVENING

A MAN slouches over a high top worktable in a dimly lit garage. Suspended above him is a dusty shrine of trophies and photos of a smiling FATHER and SON.

This man is NATE SILVERMAN. Single white male in his 40s, magnifying glasses and a mad scientist vibe, mail order button ups and velcro shoes. The only thing missing is the lab coat.

Tonight, like many days and nights before, Nate is tinkering with a miniature Victorian dollhouse.

Nate:

Trims bushes with small scissors and
Adjusts intricate rugs inside a tiny living room and
Secures a white picket fence and
Forces out the last bit of glue to string micro Christmas
lights on a tiny shingled roof.

Pausing to take in his progress, his moment of satisfaction melts into utter and complete disappointment.

CUT TO:

INT. NATE'S LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

Nate sits down to his Thursday night microwave special of Salisbury steak. A folded paper napkin place setting, TV tray, and an old recliner that's taken one too many gravy spills.

PAT SAJAK keeps company on an aging TV while Nate eats. Lace doilies, chochkies, and wood paneled walls lined with dusty family photos hang embalmed from the 80s and nothing's changed since then.

CUT TO:

INT. NATE'S LIVING ROOM - LATER

Late night INFOMERCIALS play on TV as Nate snores in his recliner.

CUT TO:

INT. NATE'S CAR - MORNING

Nate climbs into his CAR. The engine whines awake as he cranks the heater, rubbing his hands together for warmth. Even his oversized puffy coat can't cut the chill of a High Sierra December morning.

EXT. DOLLHOUSE LANE - SAME TIME

Nate's hand-me-down, beat up, wood-paneled 1990's STATION WAGON lumbers down a street lined with old victorians and wet, dirty snow. Lit Christmas lights speckle a few houses.

EXT. DOWNTOWN MEADOW VALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Nate drives through downtown and from the wreaths and the lights and the giant tree and baby Jesus in town square, it's clear this place takes Christmas very seriously.

Rounding a corner, Nate passes a festive banner hanging above a street announcing the 36TH ANNUAL DOLLHOUSE COMPETITION. Meadow Valley's Super bowl.

**EXT. VALLEY HOBBY CRAFT STORE PARKING LOT -
MOMENTS LATER**

Nate navigates the wagon into a narrow parking spot, avoiding dinging the VAN parked next to him.

Free of his car, Nate rubs sleep from his eyes and aims for the front door of VALLEY HOBBY. A loud HONK offscreen from an ELDERLY WOMAN in a PRIUS startles him awake.

He waves her on.

INT. VALLEY HOBBY CRAFT STORE – CONTINUOUS

Nate beelines for Aisle 12, Dollhouse Supplies. AKA, his happy place. Rounds a corner and nearly stops dead in his tracks when he sees GEORGE (60s), the beer-bellied bully with a never-ending score to settle.

George and a BUDDY are in front of a massive roped-off DOLLHOUSE DISPLAY. A blue ribbon and a sign reads 2018 WINNER. This is George's gathering place to self worship, talk shit, and remind everyone of his 5-year winning streak.

GEORGE

I told my girl about this thing called "Pin-terest" ...

(spots Nate)

Ahh, well there's an early bird out to catch a worm. Third Place Nate, how ya doin this morning?

Too late to turn back now. Nate's puffy coat swishes with every quick, rigid step.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Hope you're not getting too crazy with the design this year, Nate. That kind of shock might send one of us into cardiac arrest!

The chuckles from George and his buddy burn into Nate's confidence. Anxiety and anger bubbling right below the surface as he expands the distance between them, making a hard right down aisle 12.

INT. AISLE 12 – CONTINUOUS

Nate inhales the scent of fresh dollhouse supplies. This is as good as Xanax. Before he can fully relax into his surroundings, George pops in from around the corner.

GEORGE

Nate! Hey, you know Third Place Nate is all in good fun, right? Me and your dad used to go at it like that all the time.

NATE
(not making eye contact)
Sure, George.

GEORGE
Great. Yeah, your dad was something else. A real prick but also a real good guy. Say, you ready for next week? I gotta tell ya, my house is looking mighty fine this year. I'm going with a new style and I'm pretty sure it's going to knock the judges socks off. Just absolutely perfect.

Nate takes slow steps back but George closes the distance every time. A hungry animal closing in on his prey.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
I don't think anyone's ever seen anything like it before and well, I guess it doesn't hurt that I'm seeing one of the judges, eh? That June is quite a woman. You know she has the cutest little birthmark under her --

WOMAN (O.S.)
Jesus George!

Nate twists around to see SARA, a tattooed and quirky 40-something blonde behind him, stocking shelves.

SARA
Would you *please* stop harassing my customers. And no one wants to hear about anyone's birthmark, ok?

GEORGE
This is guy talk, Sara. Just talking shop, aren't we Nate.

Nate takes this as an opportunity to grab the package of glue he came for and escape, bolting towards the register and leaving them both in his dust.

INT. VALLEY HOBBY CHECKOUT COUNTER — MOMENTS LATER

RUTH, late 40s, overweight, and year-round Christmas cheer rings Nate up with a jolly smile.

RUTH

Do we have a new record?

NATE

Four hours, twenty five minutes,
thirty six seconds yesterday. A
short day by Senior's standards.

Nate checks the price on the register, digs some crumpled bills out of his old brown leather wallet.

RUTH

Get any help with the house this
year? Or... at least, someone to
keep you company?

NATE

Company would be ... distracting.

RUTH

I guess no one can replace
your dad --

Ruth strikes a hidden nerve and Nate can't get out of there fast enough. Too much interaction for this early in the day.

RUTH

Your change!

NATE

Keep it!

CUT TO:

INT. GARAGE WORKSHOP — EVENING

Armed with fresh glue, Nate attaches a string of tiny Christmas lights on the roof of his dollhouse.

Technically, this thing is perfect. Everything by the book. But something isn't right.

Over his magnifying glasses, Nate glances at the photos lining the walls. Him and his dad and dollhouse after dollhouse, all looking the same.

He pushes back from his workspace in frustration.

CUT TO:

INT. GROCERY STORE - NIGHT

Nate exhaustedly pushes a shopping cart stocked with beer and chips through a lonely ice cream aisle. Old sweats and a hoodie under his trusty puffy coat keeping him warm as he decides which half gallon will best drown his sorrows.

Elevator music playing softly overhead.

SARA (O.S.)
I'd ask if your dog died but I
don't think you have one.

Nate looks up to see Sara standing in front of him.

SARA
You ready for next week?

Straddling the line between panic and total fear, Nate does the unthinkable: fumbles a response.

NATE
Yeah, I guess I'm ... ready as
I'll ever be.

SARA
Hey, I heard George was having a
massive edging crisis. Maybe this
is your year.

NATE

Where'd you hear that?

SARA

George isn't exactly a quiet man.
I can hear everything he says from
six aisles away.

NATE

Well, I won't hold my breath.
Maybe you've heard of my nickname,
Third Place Nate?

Nate tosses a pint of Cherry Garcia in his cart. They both move
towards the front of the store.

SARA

Ever thought about doing
something else?

NATE

I don't know what else I'd do.

SARA

Birdhouses? Ultimate frisbee?
I know a guy who spent his entire
life painting the worst acrylic
landscapes and failing to sell
them at the fair. Seriously, the
worst Bob Ross hack you've ever
seen. Suddenly one day, completely
out of the blue, he quit to become
a competitive badminton player.

Nate's entertained by Sara's story, but is awkwardly and
acutely aware of his every expression. Tries a grin on for
size.

SARA (CONT'D)

He went to the Olympics!

NATE

So I'm the Bob Ross hack?

SARA

That's what you took from that story!? So you've come in third place for the last five years --

NATE

Six.

SARA

-- Six years. If this is something you love, don't give up. But also consider that *maybe* you're an Olympic-level dog groomer or something.

Fear and vulnerability and loneliness bubble over and Nate can't help but let it out.

NATE

I love it sometimes. And sometimes I want to quit. But if I quit then I'll never win.

SARA

Your dad tell you that?

NATE

Senior was more competitive than people gave him credit for.

Nate unloads his depression snacks onto the checkout belt.

SARA

Did you guys always work together?

NATE

Yup. He said we were a good team because I had the precision and he had the heart. He was the one with the imagination.

SARA

I heard some asshole once told Walt Disney he had no imagination,
(MORE)

SARA (CONT'D)

either.

CUT TO:

INT. NATE'S LIVING ROOM - LATER

Nate surfs late-night TV in his recliner with a beer. Holes in his socks, chip crumbs on his shirt.

Body shapers. Hair growth serums. Perfect skin. Erectile dysfunction. Nothing good happens on TV after 11PM.

The deep voice of DEAN SIMONS keeps Nate from flipping the channel. Dean's a Tony Robbins rip off: 40s, chiseled jaw, all the answers. Dean's on a beach: palm trees and his shirt collar blowing gently in the tropical breeze.

DEAN

You're stuck. And you keep getting yourself stuck without even realizing it. It's the insanity of humanity. You do what you've always done expecting something different than what you've always gotten. But guess what: you don't have to repeat the same painful past over and over again.

Nate slowly wipes away some of the crumbs as Dean walks along the beach, pensively watching the horizon.

DEAN (CONT'D)

You can decide to change your life in any moment. And people think changing your life looks like a big overhaul: getting a new wardrobe, a new haircut, losing 30 pounds, moving, changing your surroundings, but it's not a big event. Changing your life starts with you making a decision to do so. It's a tiny, personal moment that no one else even notices.

Dean's reflection in Nate's glasses as he preaches to a crowd of people in an auditorium.

DEAN (CONT'D)

But we often decide to change our lives and then do nothing else to back that decision up. Consistent action is the most important habit to success. It's in action that the rewards are found.

Nate sits up straight in the recliner now as Dean looks directly at Nate through the TV screen.

DEAN (CONT'D)

The happiest people aren't lucky. They're some of the most unlucky people of all, but they've chosen to keep going and do something differently. Doing something different than they did last year, last month, last week. Doing something differently than even they have done before. And that's the key to breaking the cycle.

Nate is energized. Jumps up from his recliner, wide-eyed. It's as if Dean was talking directly to him through the ones and zeroes and frequencies of space and time and television programming slates.

CUT TO:

INT. GARAGE WORKSHOP — MOMENTS LATER

The workspace light flips on in the garage.

Nate wobbles over to his dollhouse. Gives the house a thorough once-over in disgust then spins around, disappearing into the dark side of the garage.

More lights turn on and there's an entire section of the garage we've never seen before. It's floor to ceiling victorian dollhouses.

Ghosts of Nate's past. A graveyard for an entire life's work. Nearly identical to one another, covered in dust and the disappointment of an ideal not lived up to.

Nate digs around behind the houses and returns with a sledgehammer and a pair of safety goggles.

Takes one last look at his current house with buzzing contempt. Hoists the sledgehammer above his head and brings it down on the roof with a loud TWHACK.

This is where things get interesting because Nate:

Takes another swing and starts to feel good and
Goes at it again and again and
Smashes the house to rubble then
Turns to the victorian graveyard behind him and
Swings on the entire collection until everything is wood chips
laced with tears and sweat.

Now he goes for the trophies and ribbons and photos, and brings them all down with a few swoops of the sledgehammer.

A clean slate.

CUT TO:

EXT. VALLEY HOBBY — THE NEXT MORNING

Nate walks feverishly to the front door of Valley Hobby. He's a man on a mission. Puffy coat swishing. Grey skies. Breath visible. His pumping blood keeps him warm.

INT. VALLEY HOBBY CRAFT STORE — CONTINUOUS

Nate marches straight back to Aisle 12 and searches for a new DOLLHOUSE MODEL KIT.

He skips the Victorians and goes for a midcentury modern style. Way outside his comfort zone, but he's all in.

INT. VALLEY HOBBY CHECKOUT COUNTER – CONTINUOUS

Moving at a steady clip, Nate throws his boxed kit down on the checkout counter and piles his hand cart full of supplies on top: palm trees, rocks, fake lawn, popsicle sticks, paints.

Bewildered, Ruth slowly starts scanning the goods.

RUTH

You doin' a side project, hun?

Nate's got a wild look in his eyes. Bedhead. Like he drank snake juice, was struck by lightning and felt the hand of God all at the same time.

NATE

Change of plans.

Ruth is shocked by his electric energy so she stays quiet, scans and bags between concerned side eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. GARAGE WORKSHOP – LATER

Nate arrives back at his garage workshop. Evacuates the crumbs of the old Victorian off his workspace with his arm and unpacks his bag.

What happens next is all a blur, even to him, over four days and nights of work.

Nate is:

Building his tiny house. Things falling and not sticking.

Frustrated, head in hands. Reading instructions.

Walking in circles, hands overhead. Stretching.

Painting with tiny brushes.

Eating a steaming TV dinner in the garage.

Adding details: placing rocks, styling lawn. Painting door trim. Gluing front porch lights.

Adding palm trees. A pool in the back. Small patio furniture.

Gluing Christmas lights around the rooftop. His signature finishing touch.

Uncertainty and pleasure and exhaustion all mixed together, but he's done it – something different and it's exhilarating.

EXT. MEADOW VALLEY FAIRGROUNDS BUILDING – DAY

Nate enters the Meadow Valley JUDGING HALL, dollhouse on a squeaky wheeled handcart behind him. It's a packed house on entry day, as if all the retirement homes in the area dropped everyone off at the same place.

He makes it to the registration table. The two old ladies with Estelle Getty style staff the desk.

One points Nate over to section J Plot 121 on the far side of the cavernous hall. He and his cart make way through the crowd, which dramatically parts as they take notice of his house.

He feels them looking and tenses up. Questions everything.

He places his house at table 121 and we finally get a good look at it. It's a Palm Springs midcentury modern home straight out of Architectural Digest.

Old folks – his competition – gather around to get a look. Nate stands front and center, takes one last look then backs away slowly as the crowd fills in behind him. Eyes wide, soft conversation, taking in the details.

CUT TO:

EXT. NATE'S HOUSE – DAY

For what could be the first time ever, Nate's GARAGE DOOR is open, letting in the light and air of the brisk December afternoon.

A BROOM in hand, Nate is sweeping up the remnants of several decades worth of DOLLHOUSES: sticks, fake shrubbery, dust, planks, memories.

Sara pulls up to the front of the house in her beat up VOLKSWAGEN BUG in classic 80s yellow. Nate removes the earbuds pumping the deep-voiced sermons of Dean Simons.

SARA

Ah, spring cleaning in winter --
of course! Why didn't I think of
that?

Nate stops, walks towards her. Leans on the garage entry wall
with his broom.

NATE

Well, you know, sometimes you just
gotta do things differently.
... Or so I've heard.

SARA

I didn't see you at the award
ceremony yesterday.

NATE

(Squinting through
the sunlight)
Yeah.

SARA (CONT'D)

Do you want to know if you won?

NATE

Not really.

Sara gives him a slow nod and a smile.

SARA

You demo'ing your garage or
something?

Sara enters the belly of the garage and takes a look around.
Recognizes remnants of tiny furniture, siding, and shingled
roofs and puts the puzzle together.

SARA

Wait, were these houses?

NATE

Yup.

SARA

Wow. So what are you going to do now?

NATE

I've been thinking a lot about badminton lately ...

END.