

These Are the Meditations of My Heart

By Tom Hanks

She was not looking to buy an old typewriter. She needed nothing and wanted no more possessions—new, used, antique—not a thing. She had vowed to weather her recent personal setbacks with an era of Spartan living; a new minimalism, a life she could fit in her car.

She liked her small apartment west of the Cuyahoga River. She'd tossed away all the clothes she'd worn with him, the Knothead; she cooked for herself almost every night and listened to a lot of podcasts. She had enough money saved to see her to the New Year, allowing a lazy, agenda-free summer. January would freeze the lake and probably burst the pipes of her building, but by then she would be gone. New York or Atlanta or Austin or New Orleans. She had options galore as long as she traveled light. But the Lakewood Methodist Church on the corner of Michigan and Sycamore was having a Saturday Parking Lot Sale, raising money for community service programs like Free Day Care, twelve-step program meetings, and, she didn't know, maybe Meals on Wheels. She was neither a churchgoer nor a baptized Methodist, but she was fairly certain that sauntering through a parking lot full of card tables brimming with yard sale debris was not an act of worship.

As a hoot she almost bought a set of aluminum TV dinner trays, but three of them showed signs of rust. Boxes of costume jewelry revealed no treasures. But then she saw a set of Tupperware ice pop makers. As a kid, she had been in charge of pouring Kool-Aid or orange juice into the molds and inserting the patented plastic handles, which, when the freezer had done the physics, made for inexpensive icy treats. She could almost feel the hot wind of summer in the foothills, her hands sticky from melting, fruity ice. With no haggling, she got the set for a dollar.

On the same table was the typewriter, the color of faded Pop Art red—not an attraction. What caught her eye was the adhesive label glued to the top left corner of its housing. In lowercase letters and underlined (by using the Shift and 6 key) the original owner had typed

these are the meditations of my heart

The words had been typed as many as thirty years ago, when the machine was brand new, just out of the box, perhaps a gift on a girl's thirteenth birthday. A more recent owner had typed **BUY ME FOR \$5** on a piece of paper and rolled it into the carriage.

The machine was a portable; the body was plastic. The ribbon was two-tone, black over red, and there was a hole in the lid where the name Smith Corona or Brother or Olivetti had once been plugged. There was also a reddish leatherette carrying case with a half-sleeve opening and push-button latch. She punched three of the keys—A, F, P—and they all *clacked* onto the paper and settled back again. So, the thing worked, sort of.

"Is this typewriter really only five dollars?" she asked of a Lady Methodist at a nearby card table.

"That?" the woman said. "I think it works but nobody uses typewriters anymore."

That was not the question she had asked, but she didn't care. "I'll take it."

"Show me the money."

And just like that the Methodists were five bucks richer.

At her apartment, she prepped a supply of pineapple juice ice pops for later that night. She'd have a couple when the day cooled, when she could have her windows open and watch for the first fireflies of the evening. She pulled the typewriter from its cheap case, set it out on her tiny kitchen table, and rolled in a piece of printer paper from the feed of her LaserWriter. She tried each of the keys—many stuck. One of the four rubber feet on the bottom of the body was missing, so the machine rocked a bit. She pounded each of the keys from the top row straight across, shifting to caps as well, trying, with some degree of success, to shake loose the stickiness. Though the ribbon was old, the letters were legible. She tried the spacing of the carriage return—single and double -- which worked, although the bell did not. The margin sliders scraped and then jammed in place.

The typewriter needed a firm scrubbing and a lube job, which she expected to run, say, twenty-five dollars. But she pondered the greater conundrum, one that faces all who buy a typewriter in the third millennium: what is its purpose? Addressing envelopes. Her mom would enjoy typewritten letters from her wandering daughter. She could send poison-pen messages to her ex, like, "Hey, Knothead, you made a big fucking mistake!" with no fear of an email record. She could type out some remark, take a digital photo of it with her phone, then post that onto her blog and Facebook page. She could make to-do lists for the refrigerator door. That made for five Hipster-Retro reasons for her to own a new-old typewriter. Chuck in a few heartfelt meditations and she had six valid uses.

She typed the original owner's intent for the machine.

T h e s e a r e t h e m e d i t a t i o n s o f m y h e a r t .

The space bar skipped, which would not do. She grabbed her phone and googled *old typewriter repair*.

Three listings gave her the choices of a shop two hours away near Ashtabula, a place downtown that did not answer its phone, or, crazily enough, Detroit Avenue Business Machines, which was just a few minutes' walk away. She knew the shop—it was next to a tire store. She had strolled past it many times on her way to a great pizzeria and, a few doors down, to the art supply store that was soon to go out of business. She thought the small shop was for computers and printer repair so, after taking the few-minutes' walk, was amused to see, upon closer inspection of its front window, an old adding machine, a thirty-year-old telephone answering machine, something called a Dictaphone, and an ancient typewriter. The bell over the door tinkled when she entered.

One side of the shop was nothing but printers—boxes of them along with toner cartridges for any model. The other side of the shop was like a Museum for Yesteryear's Tools of Commerce. There were adding machines with eighty-one keys and pull handles, single-use ten-key calculators, a stenographer's machine, IBM Selectric typewriters, most in beige housings, and, on wall-mounted shelves, dozens of assorted typewriters gleaming black, red, green, even baby blue. They all appeared to be in perfect working order.

The service counter was in the rear of the shop. Behind it were desks and a workbench, where an old fellow was going over papers.

"How can I help the young lady?" he asked with a slight accent, most likely Polish.

"I'm hoping you can save my investment," she said. She laid the leatherette case on the counter. She unclasped the case and produced the typewriter. The old man let out a sigh at the sight of it.

"I know," she said. "This gem needs work. Half the keys are gummed up. It rocks when I type, and the space bar is kablooey. And no bell."

"No bell," he said. "Ah."

"Can you help a girl out? I have five bucks sunk into this thing."

The old man looked at her, then back at the machine. He let out another sigh. "Young lady, there is nothing I can do for you."

She was confused. From what her eyes took in, this was *the* place to get a typewriter back into working order. On the workbench behind the old man she could see disassembled machines and parts of typewriters, for crying out loud. "Because none of those parts back there match my typewriter?"

"There are no parts for this," he said, waving his hand over the dull red typewriter and leatherette case.

"You'd have to order some? I can wait."

"You don't understand." On the edge of the counter was a little case for his official business cards. He took one and handed it to her. "What do you read on this, young lady?"

She read the card. "**DETROIT AVENUE BUSINESS MACHINES. Printers. Sales. Service. Repair.** Closed Sunday, which is tomorrow," she said. "Office Hours nine a.m. to four p.m. Saturdays, ten a.m. to three p.m. My watch and your clock both show twelve nineteen." She turned the card over. Nothing on the back. "What am I getting wrong?"

"The name of this shop," the old man said. "Read the name of my shop."

"Detroit Avenue Business Machines."

"Yes," he said. "*Business Machines.*"

"Okay," she said. "Yeah."

"Young lady, I work on machines. But *this*?" Again, a wave of his hand over her five-dollar typewriter. "This is *toy*." He said the word like he was cussing: *turd*.

"Manufactured of plastic to look like a typewriter. But this is not a typewriter."

He detached the lid on the top of what he called a toy, the plastic bending until it came off with a snap to reveal the workings inside. "The typebars, the levers, the ribbon spools—plastic. The ribbon reverse. The vibrator."

She had no idea there was a vibrator in a manual typewriter.

He banged on some of the keys, flipped levers, slid the carriage back and forth, spun the platen, hit the backspace key, all in disgust. "A typewriter is a tool. In the right hands, one that can change the world. This? This is meant to take up space and make noise."

"Can you at least give it a little oil so I can take a whack at changing the world?" she asked.

"I could clean it, oil it, tighten every screw. Make the bell ring. Charge you sixty dollars and sprinkle fairy dust upon this typewriter. But I would be taking advantage of you. In a year, the space bar would still be ..."

"Kablooey?"

"Better you take it home and put a flower in it." He slid the typewriter back into its carrying case, like he was wrapping a dead fish in newspaper.

She felt bad, as though she had disappointed one of her teachers with a lazy effort, handing in a poorly structured essay. If she had still been with the Knothead, he'd be standing next to her agreeing with the old man, saying, "I told you the thing was a hunk of junk. Five dollars? Gone!"

"Look here." The old man waved his arm at the typewriters that lined the wall-mounted shelves. "These are machines. They are made of steel. They are works of engineers. They were built in factories in America, Germany, Switzerland. Do you know why they are up on that shelf right now?"

"Because they are for sale?"

"Because they were built to last forever!" The old man actually shouted. In him, she heard her father hollering, "Who left those bikes on the front lawn?... Why am I the only one dressed for church? ... The father of this house is home and needs a hug!" She realized she was smiling at the old man.

"This one," he said, moving to the shelves. He took down a black Remington 7 typewriter, a model called Noiseless. "Hand me that tablet, there." She found a pad of blank paper on the counter and gave it to him. He ripped off two pages and rolled them into the gleaming, shining machine. "Listen." He typed the words

Detroit Avenue Business Machines.

The letters whispered onto the page one by one.

"America was on the move," he said. "Work was being done in crowded offices, small apartments, on trains. Remington had sold typewriters for years and years. Someone said, 'Let's make a smaller, quieter machine. Bring down the racket.' And they did! Did they use plastic parts? No! They re-engineered the tension, the force of the keystroke. They made a typewriter so quiet it could be sold as *noiseless*. Here. Type."

He spun the machine to face her. She pecked out

Quiet down. I am typing here.

"I could hardly hear a thing," she said. "I'm impressed." She pointed to a two-tone machine, bone white and blue with a rounded body. "How quiet is that one?"

"Ah. A Royal." He replaced the black Remington 7 and pulled down a gorgeous little writing machine. "A Safari portable. A decent piece of work." He rolled in two more sheets of paper and let her go at the keys. She thought of safari-themed words to type.

Mogambo .

Bwana Devil .

"I had a farm in Africa . . . "

The machine was louder than the Noiseless and the keys did not fly as effortlessly. But there were features on the Royal that postdated the engineering of the Remington. The number 1 with an ! A button that said MAGIC COLUMN SET. And, it was two-tone!

"Is this bit of Royalty for sale?" she asked.

The old man looked at her with a smile and a nod. "Yes. But tell me. Why?"

"Why do I want a typewriter?"

"Why do you want *this* typewriter?"

"You trying to talk me out of it?"

"Young lady, I will sell you any typewriter you want. I will take your money and wave you goodbye. But tell me, why this Royal Safari? Because of the color? The typeface? The white keys?"

She had to think about it. Again, she felt like she was in school, about to take a test she could fail, a pop quiz when she hadn't done the reading.

"Because of my fickle taste," she said. "Because I brought that toy typewriter home and got to thinking I would like to write on a typewriter rather than in pen and pencil but the dang thing is gummed up and guess what? My local typewriter shop refuses to touch it. In my mind, I see myself at my little table in my little apartment, pecking out notes and letters. I own a laptop, a printer, an iPad, and this, too." She held up her iPhone. "I use them as much as any modern woman does, but..."

She stopped. She was thinking now, about what it was that had moved her to buy a five-dollar typewriter – one with an unreliable space bar and no bell – and why she was now in this shop more or less arguing with an old man, when just the day before she'd had no opinion whatsoever about old manual typewriters.

She continued. "I have loopy penmanship, like a little girl, so anything I write looks like a motivational poster in a health clinic. I'm not one who types between sips from a tumbler of booze and drags from a pack of smokes. I just want to set down what few truths I've come to know."

She went back to the service counter and grabbed the leatherette carrying case. She yanked the plastic typewriter from inside, carried it over to the shelves, and nearly threw it beside the Royal Safari. She pointed to the sticker on the top.

"I want my yet-to-be-conceived children to someday read *the meditations of my heart*. I will have personally stamped them into the fibers of page upon page, real stream-of-consciousness stuff that I will keep in a shoe box until my kids are old enough to both read *and* ponder the human condition!" She heard herself shouting. "They will pass the pages back and forth between them and say, 'So that's what Mom was doing making all that noise with all that typing,' and I am sorry! I'm yelling!"

"Ah," he said.

"Why am I yelling?"

The old man blinked at the young lady. "You are seeking permanence."

"I guess I am!" She paused long enough to take a deep breath, letting her lungs empty in a cheek-puffing sigh. "So, how much for this Jungleland typewriter?"

The shop was quiet for a moment. The old man held a finger to his lips, thinking, wondering what to say.

"This is not the typewriter for you." He picked up the two-tone Royal and placed it back on the wall-mounted shelf. "This was made for a young girl going off to her first year of university, her head filled with nonsense, thinking she would soon find the man of her dreams. It was meant for book reports."

He pulled down a compact typewriter with a body the color of green seafoam. Its keys were just a shade lighter.

"This," he said, again rolling two sheets of paper into the carriage, "was made in Switzerland. Along with cuckoo clocks, chocolate, and fine watches, the Swiss once produced the finest typewriters in all the world. In 1959, they made this one. The Hermes 2000. The apex, the state of the art in manual typewriters, never to be bested. To call it the Mercedes-Benz of typewriters is to inflate the quality of Mercedes-Benz. Please. Type."

She felt intimidated by the green mechanical box in front of her. What in the world could she possibly say on a sixty-year-old marvel of Swiss craftsmanship? Where would she drive a vintage Benz?

In the mountains above Geneva
The snow falls white and pure
And children eat cocoa krispies
From bowls with no milk.

"The typeface is Epoca," he said. "Look how straight and even it is. Like a ruled line. That's the Swiss. See these holes in the paper guide, on either side of the vibrator?"

So, *that's* the vibrator.

"Watch." The old man took a pen from his shirt pocket and put the point into one of the holes. He released the carriage, sliding it back and forth, underlining what she had written.

In the mountains above Geneva
The snow falls white and pure

"You can use different-colored inks for different emphasis. And see this knob here on the back?" There was a thimble-size knob with a softly serrated edge. "Tighten it or loosen it to adjust the action for the keys."

She did. The keys stiffened considerably under her fingertips and she had to muscle through.

Cuckoo clocks.

"When carbon paper was needed to make three or four copies of a letter, the firm setting would strike all the way to the last page." He chuckled. "The Swiss kept a lot of records."

Turning the knob the opposite way made the keys feather light.

Clocks. Mercedes Hermes 2000000

"Nearly noiseless, as well," she said.

"Indeed, yes," he said. He showed her how easy it was to set the margins by pressing the levers on each side of the carriage. As for tabs, they were set by pressing TAB SET. "This Hermes was made the year I turned ten years old. It is indestructible."

"Like you," she said.

The old man smiled at the young lady. "Your children will learn to type on it."

She liked the idea of that. "How much is it?"

"Never mind," the old man said. "I will sell it to you with one condition. That you use it."

"Well, not to be impolite," she said, "but *duh!*"

"Make the machine a part of your life. A part of your day. Do not use it a few times, then need room on the table and close it back into its case to sit on a shelf in the back of a closet. Do that and you may never write with it again." He had opened a cupboard under the displays of old adding machines, searching through spare carrying cases. He pulled out what looked like a square green suitcase with a flap clasp. "Would you own a stereo and never listen to records? Typewriters must be used. Like a boat must sail. An airplane has to fly. What good is a piano you never play? It gathers dust and there is no music in your life."

He placed the Hermes 2000 into the green case. "Leave the typewriter out on a table where you see it. Keep a stack of paper at the ready. Use two sheets to preserve the platen. Order envelopes and your own stationery. I will give you a dustcover—free of charge—but take it off when you are at home so the machine is ready to use."

"Does that mean we are now discussing the price?"

"I suppose so."

"How much?"

"Ah," the old man said. "These typewriters are priceless. The last one I sold for three hundred dollars. But for young ladies? Fifty."

"How about something for my trade-in?" She pointed to the toy typewriter she had brought in. She was haggling.

The old man looked at her with something akin to the Evil Eye. "What did you pay for that again?"

"Five dollars."

"You were taken." He pursed his lips, "Forty-five. If my wife ever finds out I made such a deal she will divorce me."

“Let's keep it between us, then.”

One thing about the Hermes 2000, it was a lot heavier than the toy. The green carrying case banged against her legs as she carried it home. She stopped twice, putting the machine down not because she needed to rest but because her palm had gotten sweaty.

In her apartment, she did as she had been instructed, as she had promised. The seafoam green typewriter went on her little kitchen table, a stack of printer paper next to it. She made herself two pieces of toast with avocado and sliced a pear into sections, her dinner. She pulled up her iTunes on her phone and hit **PLAY**, putting the phone into an empty coffee mug for amplification, letting Joni sing her old songs and Adele her new stuff as she nibbled at her meal.

She wiped her hands of crumbs and, finally in the blush of ownership of one of the finest typewriters ever to come down from the Alps, she rolled two sheets into the carriage and began to type.

TO DO:

STATIONERY—ENVELOPES & LETTER PAPER.

WRITE MOM ONCE A WEEK?

Groceries: yogurt /honey/ 1/2 & 1/2.

Juice variety

Nuts (variety)

olive oil (greek)

tomatos & Onions/scallions. CUKES!

Cheap record player/HiFi. Methodist Church?

Yoga mat.

Waxing.

Dental appointment

Piano lessons (why not?)

“Okay,” she said aloud, to herself, alone in her apartment. “I done me some typing.”

She pushed herself away from the table, from the sea-foam green of the Hermes. She pulled the to-do list from the machine and put it on her refrigerator door under a magnet. She pulled the ice pop mold from the freezer and ran it under warm water in the sink, thawing free one of the pineapple pops. Knowing she would have another, she put the Tupper-ware into the refrigerator to remain cold until she was ready for seconds.

In her living room she opened the windows to get a bit of breeze. The sun had set, so the first fireflies of the evening would begin to flare in a bit. She sat on the windowsill and enjoyed the cold, shaped pineapple and watched as squirrels ran along the telephone wires, perfect sine waves with their bodies and tails. Sitting there, she had her second ice pop as well, until the fireflies began to float magically above the patches of grass and sidewalk.

In the kitchen, she rinsed her hands and returned the Tupperware to the freezer. Six ice pops would be hers tomorrow. She eyed the typewriter on the table.

An idea came into her head. How is it, she thought, that the standard version of a woman, single, after a breakup, has her drinking wine alone in a sad, empty apartment until she passes out on the couch with, she didn't know, *Real Housewives* on the television? She didn't own a television, and her one remaining vice was homemade ice pops. She had never passed out from wine in her life.

She sat back down at the table and rolled two more pieces of paper into the Hermes 2000. She set the margins in close, like a newspaper column, and the spacing at 1½.

She typed

A Meditation from My Heart

then returned the carriage and started a paragraph. Her nearly noiseless typing echoed softly around her apartment and out her open window until long after midnight.