

Free Space

by Paula Ray

He was burnt toast with cataracts. She was a coffee stained napkin with arthritis. They met at Bingo when they both had a false alarm. The winner was some kid from Ohio or Oklahoma -- one of those states that begins with an "O" and ends with a yawn.

She liked the fuzz on his kiwi-skull. He liked the sound of her polyester pantlegs rubbing together like hands trying to keep warm.

He got so distracted by the friction, he turned off his hearing aids. She thought he was deaf or disinterested, but he read her lips and caught the fireflies in her smile with his bifocals.

Neither one of them was looking for a mate -- they just wanted a glimpse of unloneliness: a hand-me-down sweater with a tiny hole under one arm and an extra button sewn to the underside of the waistband.

He said his name was Tom, short for Tomorrow, may I call you?

She thought he was lying and it was for Tom-Cat -- pawing fishbones.

She wrote her name on the back of a losing Bingo card.

He said her name, Myra, under his breath. It was as quiet and warm as oatmeal in his mouth on a cold morning and he hadn't eaten in days.

He said it aloud and her cheeks filled with cinnamon.

