

You and Your Beautiful Words

I'm re-reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I've just reached the chapter where Scout finds the chewing gum in the knot-hole of the old oak. I love this chapter.

'Jesus,' Nelli says. 'When are you gonna turn out the light?'

'Mmmm,' I say, not really listening to her or hearing her because I'm in Maycomb County, knees grimy with red dust and the taste of Wrigley's Double-Mint in my mouth.

Nelli huffs off to the spare room. I turn my head as she disappears through the door and that's when I see she's wearing lacy underwear instead of the usual pyjamas. I should have noticed that sooner. Really, I should.

We've been living together a year now. It was Nelli's idea, and I thought it was a good one. We sold our apartments and found a little clapboard house in the suburbs. In many ways it was a relief to quit downtown. Nelli loved the garden, and I loved the living room because the walls were lined with shelves and I knew that for the first time I'd have a proper home for my books. The day I shelved them was one of the most satisfying of my life. I had a system. Sections for poetry, short stories, novels, biography. *Sub-divided* sections: nineteenth century literature, beat poetry, et cetera.

Nelli wanted to mix her books with mine, but I didn't think that was a good idea. Don't get me wrong – she has a reasonable collection. She majored in English Literature at the University of Florida, which pisses all over my high school diploma. But Nelli's books aren't loved. She's barely read a novel since graduation. Says the course put her off – she can't read without deconstructing the text, feeling as though she ought to be holding a pencil, scribbling notes in the margins.

I suggested she use the teak bookcase in the guest bedroom. She wasn't happy, but this was one argument I had to win.

It's a warm September evening and the sun is hazing through the french doors. Outside, the peaches on the tree are shrivelling and wasps are cruising in and out of the oozing flesh. I'm sick of peaches. Nelli says we should try to eat five every day. I'm pissing peach juice, if you must know.

We're eating pizza from a takeout box, watching crap on the TV. Nelli is still mad, even though it's three days since the *To Kill a Mockingbird*/lacy underwear night.

'How was work today?' I ask.

'Usual,' she says. There's a dribble of orange Pepperoni oil down the side of her mouth. Normally I'd lean over and wipe it off, or at the very least I'd let her know, verbally.

'Did you decide on the mascara strapline?' I ask.

She nods.

'What did you go for?'

'Lashes to long for.'

'Good,' I say. 'Catchy.'

The theme tune to *Grey's Anatomy* starts up, plinky plonk, and this makes me feel restless. I think of my book lying on the bedside cabinet. *The Grass Harp* by Truman Capote. I thought it would be fitting, after *Mockingbird*.

I put the box down on the carpet and turn to Nelli. 'Well, if you don't mind I might just...'

'...go off and read my book,' she says, in a sarcastic, mimicking kind of voice.

'I'm sorry?'

‘You’re going off to read, right? Same as every other night?’

‘You know I don’t like *Grey’s Anatomy*. It’s so...predictable.’

‘Ha!’ she laughs. ‘That’s priceless, the way you read your books, over and over. You must know them by heart.’

‘Reading is different,’ I say, but I know I’m gonna have trouble explaining why. ‘Books are words. And words are...beautiful.’

‘You and your beautiful words,’ she says. ‘Since when did you tell me I was beautiful? I’ve been thinking about this, Jon. What if I gave you a choice: books or me? Which would you choose?’

‘That’s just stupid.’

‘No, Jon, I am genuinely interested. Which would you choose: me or the books?’

I’m pretty crazy about Nelli.

So I say I’d choose her any time, but as I’m not interested in *Grey’s Anatomy*, would she mind if I just...

She leaps up from the sofa and flings the takeout box. It hits me on the right ear. She starts yelling. Truth is, her voice is a bit muffled because I’m cradling the injured ear, but I get the message. If I don’t stop reading, she says, if I don’t stop *obsessing* about reading, she’s going to give our relationship a serious re-think. She reminds me how next year she’ll be thirty, and how she needs to know whether I’m serious about our future.

Okay, I say, okay. I’ll lay off the books. Once I’ve finished the new Lorrie Moore which has been sitting on the bedside cabinet for three weeks now. Alright, she says, Lorrie Moore then that’s it. Try for one month. One month without literature. It might broaden your mind.

Then she disappears into the garden to pick some more peaches. Sweet Jesus, I am sick of peaches.

I'm late for work. My train leaves in six minutes. If I run, I might just make it.

I'm packing *Mrs Dalloway* into my bag when Nelli appears in the living room. She's wearing the cream business suit which shows off her smooth tanned skin.

'What are you doing?' she asks.

'Trying not to be late for work.'

'No books, Jon. It was a deal. Starting today, remember?'

I'm speechless. No books at home, that's what I agreed to. But no books on the train? No books at work? How the hell am I meant to get through another shitty day in the accounts department at AT&T without a few chapters to look forward to in my lunch hour?

'Nelli, sweetheart, you have to be kidding me. I don't have time for this.'

'No, Jon,' she delves into my bag and holds up the book as if it's some kind of murder weapon. Her red-painted nails are like bullet-holes on the cover. 'Start this today and you'll be hooked by bedtime,' she says. Suddenly she's speaking so quiet it's almost scary. 'You promised me.'

'Okay, you win,' I say, brushing past because I absolutely cannot be late for work again. Pete Hoffman is already on my case. 'See you tonight.'

On the train I shut my eyes and I'm haunted by the expression on Nelli's face this morning; the deep frown slashed across her forehead and the way her top lip curled like I was six kinds of asshole. I picture her face on the day we met. She looked incredible that night, dressed up for a charity ball at the Holiday Inn on Capitol

Avenue. I wasn't so bad myself in a hired tux, but I have to say I was blown away when Nelli started chatting to me at the bar.

'You look like you're in pain,' she'd said. 'Smile!'

'I am in pain,' I told her. 'My shoes are two sizes too small.'

'You kidding? Why?'

'I borrowed them from a friend.'

'Take them off,' she laughed. 'Then maybe you might ask me to dance.'

My body is swaying a little as the train speeds along the track. I was in awe of Nelli that night. She smelt of coconut and honey and the feel of her skin...Jesus, it had been quite a while since I'd touched a woman.

The train is almost downtown now. My eyes are still shut and I'm still thinking. It occurs to me that there is something wrong – dishonest – about the way we met. When Nelli first laid eyes on me, the person she saw wasn't...*me*. She saw a guy in a tuxedo and shiny black shoes, drinking a Martini because the bar tender talked me into it when all I really wanted was a beer. Fact is, I didn't even want to be at the damn ball in the first place. Pete Hoffman talked me into it – told me I had to make up the numbers because the AT&T table was looking a little thin.

Did I see Nelli that night?

Now that is a fascinating question.

Three weeks into the book ban and Nelli is loving it. It's true, we have talked a lot more. We have been to the movies twice, and out for dinner once. Plus there has been a great deal of sex.

The leaves are turning yellow on the peach tree. Mouldering fruit hang limply from the higher branches and peach stones litter the ground like tiny brown skulls. It's the

last day of the ban, and Nelli has planned a special meal. It's some kind of Moroccan stew, but she's going to substitute the apricots for you-know-what.

I'm watching CNN when she calls to say there's a delay on the interstate and can I take the lamb out of the refrigerator.

'I love you,' she says before hanging up.

Overall, this book ban of Nelli's has been an interesting experiment. I've coped pretty well. Reading isn't actually a matter of life and death, I've discovered, and when you're not reading, you do have more time to think.

I turn off CNN and gaze at my bookshelves.

My favourite novel so far – I still have many more books to read, after all - is *Revolutionary Road*. I think of old April Wheeler, staying up all night trying to write her letter to Frank. In the end she kept it short. 'Whatever happens, don't blame yourself,' was what Frank read, when he finally went back to the blood-stained house. I take a leaf out of April's book, but I decide to go even shorter.

Dear Nelli,

Blame yourself.

Jon.

I pick a selection of Richard Yates novels from the shelf and stuff them into a backpack. I'll find a room in some motel. I intend to stay up all night.