

WE TOLD YOU SO

All those things you've been thinking, feeling, living; those thoughts slowly dawning on you ... *Someone else already said them aloud. AND THAT'S WHAT MAKES THEM SO SPECIAL.*

WORDS *Elle Glass*

THERE ARE STORIES that you fall for, that you carry with you until they feel like your own. They are told to you by poets, shameless with their experiences, and kept with you in the kind of books you underline and annotate and live in fear that someone might borrow and never return.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* for the poolside parties and three-piece white suits, Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's *Please Kill Me* because everybody was in love with everybody ("We were all kids and it was like high school") and Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* because that's the way writing – your writing – should be.

While you love each for their own reasons, each resonates with you; they're a reassurance that wherever you are hoping to go, there is someone somewhere who has gone before you. It's in these tales you learn about yourself, and find the voice to build your own.

SOMETIMES IT'S BEST TO TAKE A LEFT AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS

Some stories don't just FEEL like your own, they become it. Like a parallel universe, they bring a sense of déjà vu in real time so strong it grants you carte blanche to chase whatever tangent you have seen from the corner of your eye.

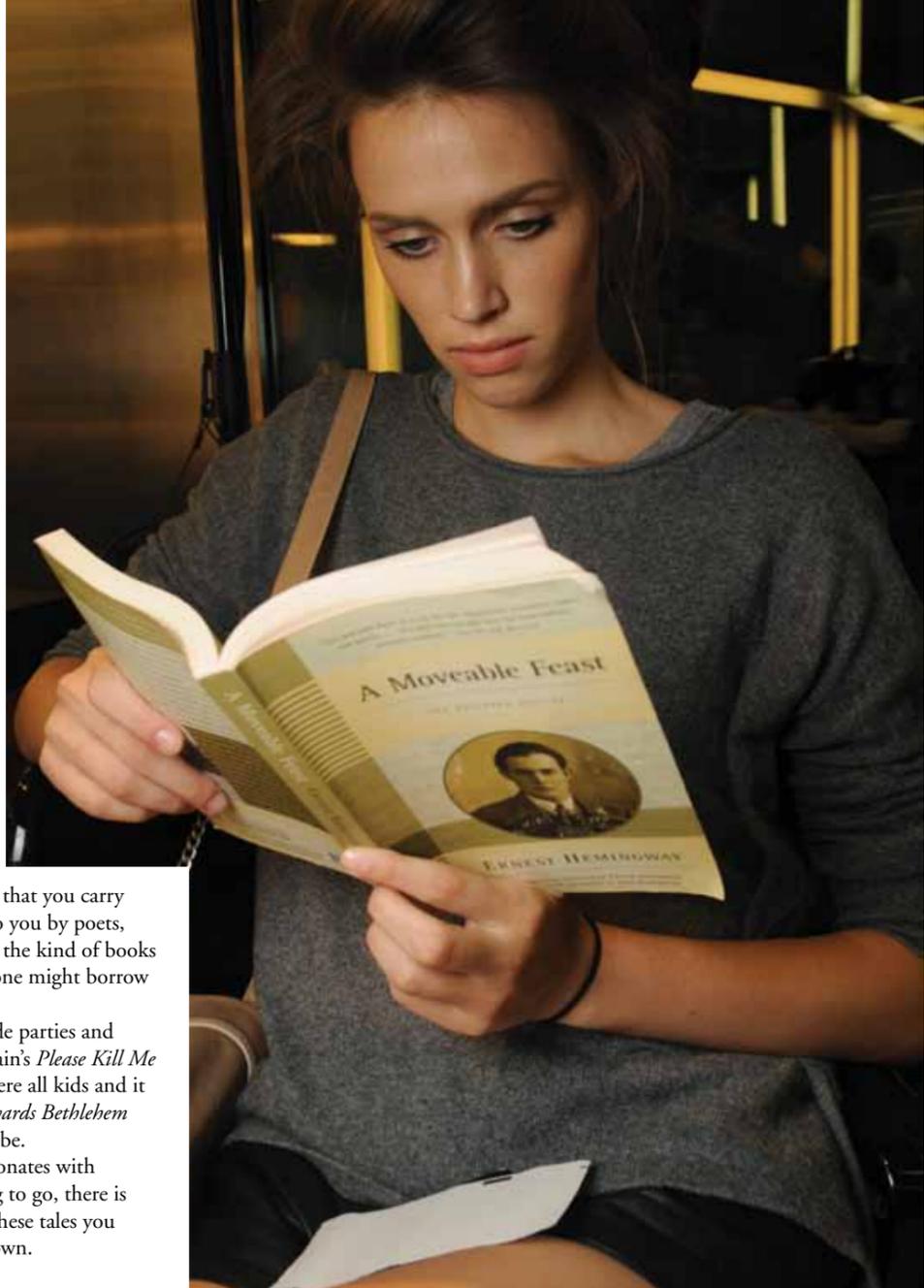
This is one of those. Not because it's so close to home (the whole project came about because Miranda July was procrastinating writing a screenplay – we were reading *It Chooses You* while trying to skirt this deadline) but because it is so unexpected. Even July herself didn't expect it – she was supposed to be finishing what would eventually be released as *Paw Paw* but was instead Googling herself, clicking on one thing after another after another, and calling it 'research'. She was at that so-close-to-done stage – "like a person who had fought dragons and lost limbs and crawled through swamps and now, finally, the castle was visible" – that it was almost excusable to read LA's weekly trade rag *PennySaver* from front to back, and to fix her attention – all of it – on a leather jacket.

"I wanted to know more things about what this leather-jacket person thought," July writes, "how they were getting through the days, what

they hoped, what they feared – but none of that was listed." What was listed, though, was leather-jacket person's phone number. So, in the name of research, July put on her phone voice, arranged a photographer and met Michael, the leather-jacket man in Hollywood, saving for his gender transformation. Like a serial blind dater, she continued to work her way through all that *PennySaver* had to offer: Pam in Lakewood with other people's photo albums (\$10 each) and Dina in Sun Valley for a Conair Hair Dryer (\$5) among them. Their stories, written by July partly as a script, mostly not, are enough to open up even the tiniest hearts – she is honest to the point of embarrassment, beyond deadpan, laying all hopes, fears and dreams, out on the page with a price (O.N.O.) attached.

July's quest is proof that the happy accidents, the distractions that so completely consume you, the digressions with such a pull aren't a complete waste of time. It's testament of the beautiful stories you find off route, when you are doing something you probably shouldn't be. Sure, the destination might pay your rent but the journey will get a book out of you (and, in July's case, another scene for your movie).

It Chooses You by Miranda July (Canongate).



SOMEONE WILL CARVE YOUR NAME, MAYBE TWICE

There is something so beautiful in being sad, and even more so in languishing in retrospect. Without giving too much away, Sophie Calle's account goes a little something like this:

He was the kind of man who didn't like goodbyes. He threatened to forget her when she announced she had a ticket to Japan on the grace of a three-month artist grant. He didn't feel like writing, but instead like "lying low. Making (himself) wanted. Driving (her) mad for lack of news." He said he'd meet her in New Delhi. He met someone else. He never showed.

It's a chronicle of the 92 days she checked off – back then – as days keeping her from him – reading it is like opening your old journals, a sharp reminder of what was. So what if she's more of a photographer than she is a writer, and this is less a 'literary' book and more a picture book. She – like Tracey Emin in *Strangeland* (if you haven't read it, do) – uses words economically, with near-utilitarian precision, writing him letters that refuse to even use paragraphs. Each page is – relentlessly – another chapter in her near-apocalyptic countdown, each word and its encounter heavy with a sense of impending doom. With 46 days to go, she seeks directions from a local fortune-teller even though she doesn't speak Japanese or have a translator.

Nowhere does she recount her trip, share landmarks, or any evidence of her grant. Nor do we see Him. Instead, it is only her distractions – sharing her bathwater with a near stranger and a bed with an Italian in room 814 of the Grand Palace Hotel – and her suffering. She tries to wear this thin through "sheer repetition", telling the story over and over, each time remembering a different nuance, changing her sentence structure, her focus ever so slightly. And just like a journal, where you pour so much of your soul into someone that just doesn't care, eventually those words become something of your own.

Best of all, though, is the dedication:

I wanted to dedicate *Exquisite Pain* to a man. He once casually remarked that he was used to that kind of thing, and that a dedication didn't mean anything, quite blasé, and unimpressed.

All the same.

For Grégoire B. For the man who does not like dedications.

In three months, she was done. The exorcism worked. Still for fear of a relapse (which are so easy to do), she waited 15 years to write the story. *Exquisite Pain* Sophie Calle (Thames & Hudson from gertrude & alice).

MAYBE WE'LL NEVER REALLY KNOW THE PEOPLE WE LOVE

Joyce Carol Oates writes in longhand, from eight 'til one most days, breaks, and then continues, writing into the evening. She has more than 50 books to her name, and many hours have been spent – cross-legged on the floor at Bondi's gertrude & alice – agonising over which to read next. Oates writes the kind of books that remind you what a story can actually do. Her sentences trap you and hold you tight, until they decide they are done with you. She sees herself as a "perennially romantic traveller, an 'eye' enraptured by the very jumble and clamour of America".

Expensive People (1968) is her third novel; nominated for the National Book Award, it's a manuscript she let long linger. In précis,

it's the story of a child murderer (not to be confused with a child-murderer) struggling to know his beautiful, brilliant writer mother. He knows her in that she drives a yellow car, has expensive tastes and abandons him, repeatedly, on a whim. "Mothers like Nada, who are always backing out of the driveway, draw every drop of love out of us." But he soon stumbles on the rest of her, the part she keeps for herself, her writing she has forbidden him to read. "Without her writing she would have just been Nada in the kitchen, Nada in her bathrobe upstairs, Nada on the telephone, Nada here, there, hugging me, turning vaguely from me – just that dark-haired lovely woman with the slightly knobby knees and wrists..."

Before he knew her words, it was – she was – all make-believe. "You who've never read the secret words of the familiar, domesticated people you love, you who have never snuggled into their brains and looked out through their eyes, how can you understand what I have felt? It's as if I had opened a door and saw Nada not as she wanted to seem to us, but as she really was..."

"As she really was": it's that you are what you do, what you push your heart and sweat into. Your own private Idaho (or wherever else you find your heart-space). It's purely selfish, near narcissistic, but it's the truth: as a writer, as an anything, you want to matter, you want to be known. Still, *Expensive People* is less about him, and more about her. Oates' trick is that you – along with the narrator – are just a minor character, a reader. That the sun doesn't revolve entirely around you, and no matter what you do, you cannot change its orbit, or her story. You will never really know Nada. Instead, you need to be your own Nada.

Expensive People by Joyce Carol Oates (Ontario Review Press)

TO BE YOUNG (IS TO BE SAD, TO BE HIGH)

This was, we thought, just another filler in the stocking from a well-meaning Santa. The title wasn't doing anything for us. Until we read it. All of us – we all had the same tan lines from a book held high, blocking out the glare. We were all just as sad when we'd read it, not because it was sad but because it was over.

Jeffrey Eugenides wrote *Middlesex* and *The Virgin Suicides* and won a Pulitzer Prize, but this time his tale is set in the States in the early 80s, where three college students have their future – bright and shining – ahead of them. Their potential is yet to be tapped, and their tomorrows are looming, waiting on their decisions of today. It's that familiar feeling of "I'm only 22 and I've fucked up my life", of getting stoned and confessing your undying love to someone in a letter they never bother to read, or the hysteric weariness that comes of "craving, of wanting, of hoping, of losing". It sounds clichéd, painful even, but in Eugenides' delicate weaving of a narrative from three different perspectives (Christos Tsiolkas take note) it is anything but. Instead, as the three grow into their tomorrows, Eugenides offers us this: golden years will only stay golden so long as they are left alone. That, in hindsight, that 'something' – or, that 'someone' – that you thought was one thing was, more likely, maybe, something else. A missed opportunity, a safety net when you needed it most, whatever. But: still just as important to you, but in a same-same-but-different kind of way. And sometimes, when you are lucky, in a better way: just like he writes of the Parisian skyline, "It took courage to let things fall apart so beautifully".

The Marriage Plot by Jeffrey Eugenides (Fourth Estate)