

When Books are Your Life

Eleanor woke to the smell of fresh laundry and the snap of sheets being hung outside of her window. It's Saturday, she thought, and burrowed happily into her down pillow. Her favorite day. After chores and helping Ma, she had the rest of the day to read. With a fresh stack of books on her nightstand, she reached out a finger to run down the binding, thrilling to the bumpy thickness of the new stories waiting for her.

Her door creaked open and Truman, her bleary-eyed brother, stumbled in, still half asleep, blue blanket dragging behind him.

"Move over," he said, and without waiting, scooted in the bed next to her. He smelled like fresh milk and Eleanor snuggled up next to him, wrapping his tiny body in the crook of her own. She reached up to scrunch his hair, thick brown curls that felt good under her hands.

"Wake up, Tru, it's the weekend, we're free. What do you want to do?"

"Sleeeeep," he murmured. And they lay there for moments, still and at ease, listening to their mother down in the yard, moving around and hanging clothes. Life was good, and they slept.

Then, Eleanor was bouncing, not sure whether it was a dream or real. She felt her body go up and down, up and down, and finally opened her eyes to see Truman towering over her, stomping on the mattress.

"Come on! I'm hungry. Get up, get up. I want to build a fort."

"Fine, Truman Scott, I'll get your breakfast, but no fort today, thank you very much. I want to read."

He frowned, crossed his arms. “That’s all you ever want to do. Stupid old books. What else?”

“It’s what I like!”

“Can’t you think of one other fun thing? Ever? Please, Ellie, please. For meeee?”

She threw her legs over the bed, the yellow flannel nightgown brushing her ankles. “We can write stories?” She smiled, knew this wouldn’t do.

“Ugh. Something *else*. Not reading or writing or nothing to do with letters. Or books. Or...” His hand went out to stop whatever she would say next, “pens or libraries either!” Then, he was wrapping his blanket around his shoulders like a cape. “Let’s be superheroes today!”

“Enough. I’m barely awake. Let me think about it. How about, I’ll help with your fort if you let me read after. Deal?” She held out her hand to shake, believing she’d offered a reasonable solution. But he jumped off the bed, ran around the room, and on his way out of the door, a blue blur of a boy, he shouted, “Fine! But you never have any good ideas! Bo-ring!”

As soon as he left, she carefully pulled the top book from the stack, for it seemed to be calling out to her. She had recently discovered Victoria Holt books, gothic romances that sent her reeling into a dark and mysterious place unlike any other she’d found. They seemed like they should’ve been forbidden, and she had the urge to hide them from her parents’ eyes. Different than anything she’d read her whole life, these stories made her wonder what it was like to be kissed...on a bluff with wind swirling her long skirt around and a handsome man holding her in his arms. She was not sure how she even found them; just last week, she had finished *Little Women*, the last book in her boxed collection, and it felt like those women and Holt’s *Mistress of Mellyn* were not even of the same world.

Her father had given her that big, boxed set two years ago on her tenth birthday. How she loved it, even more than the Dandelion library he'd given her when she was little. Although she always liked books, that first boxed set sealed the deal, elevated them to a new level—the idea that someone would frame and preserve a set of books in a box made them seem more important somehow. Also, she liked how easy it was to keep the books organized and in order—there was never one out of place this way. Eleanor remembered looking at each, which contained two stories and were printed upside down from the other. Her favorites were *Veronica/The Three Little Horses* and all of the Babar books. She put those on the high shelf and would not let her brother touch them for anything. Oh she would gladly read to him, but they were too valuable to let his careless little hands have the chance of damaging them. When her father gave her the Companion Library Set another year, she wrapped her arms around the box and didn't let go for long minutes. These books were for big kids—they were long novels not meant for babies. *Little Women/Little Men*, *Black Beauty/The Call of the Wild*—these were serious and Eleanor felt instantly grown up upon receiving them. Her father knew her heart, and by giving her these collections made her happy in the knowledge that someone in the world truly understood her, because frankly, she didn't believe that anyone else did, not for a moment.

Books were like life to Ellie. She changed as the books changed; with each new discovery, she learned something about herself and the people around her. And just when she thought she'd known it all, everything there was to know, another layer would unfold—new places and characters and words and stories laid out in front of her like a beneficent offering. This morning, she was thrust into a place she'd not known existed, and more than anything, she longed for a black cape, auburn curls, and a coach ride on the moors. Any world but the one she was in. Eleanor fell with abandon into the plot, became the young heroine and then her room and

her life melted away for a while as well. Minutes or perhaps hours—days, maybe decades or centuries—later, she was startled by a rap on the door, and reluctantly climbed out of the story she'd happily been in.

“Eleanor.” It was Ma. “Time for chores. Your brother’s downstairs pouting because you promised him breakfast and a fort, neither of which you’ve done. Come and help me with the cleaning.”

Her mother was pretty but strict, and rarely smiled. Not mean—no, Eleanor never thought that. Just, well, serious. Always moving, straightening, cleaning or cooking, or doing things to the house. A chronic list-maker, her mother—Elizabeth to her friends, Lizzie to her husband, and just Ma to her children—had lists upon lists, and Eleanor was certain there was one waiting for her today, even on this fine Saturday.

“Get dressed for the day young lady,” she said, and smoothed back her already graying hair, wild from what she’d been doing this morning. Pausing, she looked at her daughter, saw the books, and said, “Did you get any good ones this time?”

Eleanor, thrilled at being asked, for it was always her father who did and who was the one who loved to read, offered her mother the abridged version of the books she’d gotten. Her mother listened briefly, and then started moving away from the door, signaling that it was time to get back to business.

Sure enough, there was an enumerated list written on thin tablet paper, awaiting Eleanor when she stepped unwillingly into the real world, and so it was determined that she’d spend the rest of the morning wiping down baseboards, cleaning the bathrooms, folding clothes, and dusting all of the furniture, along with a few miscellaneous items as well. Eleanor hated their old house; it seemed empty, hollow, with high, high ceilings and smooth plaster walls, big old

furniture—dark velvet sofas and chairs. She didn't feel comfortable downstairs, only in her room, really. And the attic. The rest of the house smelled musty and old, the surfaces were bare and boring—tidy, is what her mother called them, refusing to have any clutter around. Eleanor and her brother were on constant surveillance for any of their belongings lying around, because there would be a lecture for certain if they were careless enough to mess up the house. Neat and tidy, spic and span, those were Ma's favorite phrases. Jars and cans were in straight rows, labels forward—Eleanor never saw her mother actually organize them, but there they were, magically perfect, whenever a cabinet door was opened.

What a waste of a perfectly good morning, Eleanor thought. I'll never waste my time cleaning like this when I get older, she told herself. It was no fun and who cared anyway.

Truman walked past her, tugging on her skirt, "You forgot about me, Ellie."

"No I didn't, Ma needed me to help. You know how it is." She propelled him away, "Go find something to do. I'm not finished yet." He squeaked his bare feet in protest on the hardwood floor.

He turned, "You always forget."

Ellie watched Truman walk away, his body thin and drooping in despair, and felt a moment of remorse, for he was special, and sometimes she forgot that. Although she had no memory of it, he was terribly ill as a baby, almost died, her father told her. "You must take care of your brother, he's got a fragile disposition," her mother said. She never knew the details of what exactly was wrong with Truman because no one liked to talk about it, but he almost died, she knew that much; it was enough for everyone to treat him as if he were made of glass, and while Eleanor loved him dearly, sometimes she just wanted to treat him like the normal boy he seemed to her.

And just as she'd scratched off the last item on her to-do list, the doorbell rang like a knell, and her two friends, Sandy and Delia were there, asking her to come and play.

"That sounds like a splendid idea, Eleanor. Go on outside and get some fresh air," Ma said, pushing her out the door before she could protest.

Gosh! She would never get a break! This was supposed to be *her* day and so far she hadn't done a single thing *she* liked to do. The two girls stood on her porch, already making a plan. Sandy was the leader—she was stick-skinny and bossy. Delia, the go between—was naturally tan and had a sweet face—was put in the position of breaking any ties when Sandy wanted to do one thing and Eleanor wanted to do another. However, Eleanor rarely—no, never ever won.

"What do y'all want to do," Sandy asked, arms crossed, head tilted as though she really wanted to know.

"Read," Eleanor mumbled.

"Let's play kickball," Delia said.

"We could play Mystery Date," Sandy suggested.

"No not that!" Delia whined. "I hate that stupid game—I always get the worst one."

Eleanor plopped down in the porch swing, watching the show as these two figured out what she would be doing.

"Well, I am not playing kickball today," Sandy said. "I'm wearing my new shoes, Delia, and you know this because the second I walked out of my door, you started drooling over them. Jealous."

“You can change them, you know.” Delia was feeling frisky today, Eleanor thought. Normally, she gave in pretty quickly. Eleanor didn’t even bother participating in the conversation, just observed, face cradled in her hands, and waited.

“Ok then, what about Barbies.” It was her trump. Delia loved Barbies even though she and all of them knew they were getting much too old to play with them. And before she knew it, Eleanor found herself sitting in Sandy’s room, on her orange shag rug, moving around this tall skinny Barbie with her staring blue eyes, following Sandy’s narration with barely concealed disinterest.

Carelessly bouncing her Barbie up and down, Eleanor decided that she was going to do this for exactly ten more minutes and then was going home. She had too much to do there that she liked much better, and she didn’t care a bit what Sandy had to say about it. Not only did she have her new Victoria Holt novel waiting, but even better than that, a book that she was saving--savoring--making herself wait to read until she couldn’t stand it a moment longer. *Anna Karenina*. Her first good book, a rare book—it was an antique with green and gold binding and delicate-thin pages—given her by her father. She remembered when he called her into his study, a quiet, formal room she rarely ventured into when he wasn’t there because it seemed too grown up for her.

He sat behind a big oak desk, a small brass lamp illuminating him in a kind of glow. Her father was a big man, tall with broad shoulders but more gentle than anyone would expect. If he held her hand or patted her back, it was with the lightest touch. He had dark curly hair like Truman and a quick smile. Someone would write a story about him one day where he would be the hero, saving a woman whose life was in danger—Eleanor was sure of it. She could almost imagine it already.

“Come in honey,” he had told her.

Skipping in at the invitation, Eleanor moved to his side. He smelled like spices—from the Orient she imagined—and when he reached down to give her a hug, she snuggled in.

“I’ve got something for you,” he smiled.

“My late birthday present?” she jumped in place. “Is it? Is it!”

“Yes, yes it is, and I’m sorry about how late it is, but this is a very special present, and well worth the wait, I suspect.” He opened a drawer, and there was her gift, nestled among paper-clipped envelopes and colored folders—Eleanor always wondered what was in them, but not today, because her gift was finally here. Placing it softly in her opened hands, her father watched her with a spark in his eyes, knowing how she would react.

Slowly enticing the pink tissue paper away from the heavy rectangle, certain it was a book, but having no idea which one, Eleanor fought the urge rip it off but did not, exhilarated with the anticipation of the unknown. And then, under the paper, she saw the most delicious seafoam green cover she’d ever seen in her life--it looked like a true treasure. The smooth canvas cover was stamped in gold—an elaborate teardrop-shaped, flower-embellished mark graced the center of the book, and underneath, the title: Anna-Kare-nina in three bold capital-letter lines, like a pronouncement.

“Daddy,” she said, almost crying. Opening the book, the fragile onionskin paper folded softly away, tiny typeset teasing her to jump in now, this moment even to this very page regardless of not having started at the beginning. Come, it said to her. She held her nose close to the book and inhaled deeply.

“What on earth are you doing?” her father chuckled.

“Smelling the words,” she said, almost forgetting that he was there.

“So I guess you like it?” He rubbed her head, his touch bringing her back.

She placed the book on the desk and threw her arms around him. “It’s the best present ever. In the whole world! I’ll never get anything better.” Burying her face in his shirt, she started to cry. “Thank you, thank you daddy. I love it. I love you.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I love you too, Ellie-Belle. I knew you’d like it.”

Pulling away, looking at him earnestly with eyes big and brown, she said, “I’m going to save it though. It’s too special to read right away.” As she told him this, looked into his eyes, she knew he understood.

“Ellie.” Sandy’s hard hand grabbed her arm, shook her. “Ellie. Hello in there? Where are you?” Slowly, Eleanor focused on Sandy’s face, those blue eyes narrowed and willing her to participate. “You’re awful at this. The worst.”

“I know,” Eleanor said, dropping her Barbie. “Guess it’s time to go,” and she unfolded herself and walked out of the door, pulled her skirt away from her sweaty legs, and ignoring the indignant looks of her friends, ran back to her house, excited to be free to do what she wanted.

As she burst through the front door, she nearly collided with her mother, who was holding a large wicker basket. Eleanor gave a quick, “Sorry,” and took the stairs two at a time.

“Eleanor Rose,” her mother reprimanded. “I’m working in the garden, keep an eye on your brother.”

“Yes m’am!”

In one swift motion, she dove into her freshly made bed and grabbed her book, feeling like she’d just won a race.

She wasn’t even sure how she fit with Sandy and Delia anyway—they didn’t really share one thing in common except that they lived on the same street. Almost always Ellie would’ve

chosen to stay inside over playing with them, only her mother made her, said it was good for her. Fresh air, she said But a soft pillow and Victoria Holt were all she wanted on this day, and before she knew it, she was swept away by the story, easily imagining herself there rather than here. She twirled her hair around her finger, wishing it was thick and coppery like Martha's, or Marty as she called herself in the book. Ellie could feel the carriage bumps as though she were riding in one, and let the plot continue to move her along. Time seemed to slip away as she read on, laying so still, the words mesmerizing her into a trance.

Later, a crash sounded in the distance and Ellie thought for a moment that she heard crying, but decided it must be coming from next door and so put a finger in each ear in order to focus on the words in front of her. She was excited that she was almost finished this book and could start another. With a cool breeze coming from the window, if she could stay this way for hours and hours until night fell, life would be just perfect.

But it was not to be, and when the door swung open suddenly, Ellie was wrenched from the Cornish cliffs to her suddenly small bedroom. Her mother, hair flying, covered with dirt and blood, her face tight with anger, came at her, took the book out of her hand and threw it across the room. Pulled her up by her arm. "Your brother fell down the stairs," she said, each word punctuated by anger. "You were supposed to be watching him."

"Is ...is he alright?"

"No, Eleanor he is not. Come on. I have to take him to the doctor and you're coming with us, young lady. You're in a world of trouble."

"I'm sorry, Ma. I didn't hear anything!" But maybe she did, and she felt the lie as thin as a piece of paper, floating in the air around her.

"Not another word," her mother said.

He was on the sofa, a wet rag that used to be white and now was pink, held to his mouth, his shirt covered in blood.

“Tru! What happened?” Eleanor ran over to him as his mother collected her purse and her keys.

“I fwel,” he mumbled, moving the rag away to reveal a bloody hole in his mouth where his front teeth—his new ones—had been.

“Oh no!” She tried to hug him, but he pushed her away with a red-stained hand.

“No, Ellie, no. Stay away. You never came.” and he started crying.

Her mother came into the room, gave her a look and pulled Truman into her arms.

“Eleanor, if I have to tell you one more time...”

The rest of the afternoon was filled with silent accusations as they went from the doctor’s office to the pharmacy and back home. When they pulled in the driveway, Eleanor just wanted her father to be back, and when she saw no other car there, knew she’d have to contend with her mother’s anger and receive whatever punishment she saw fit unless he got home soon. After Truman was tucked gently into bed, her mother came into her room, but just barely—she stood on the threshold, doorknob in hand. “No books, Eleanor. No books for a month. Each one of these books is coming out of this room and you will not get a single one back for thirty days. Do you understand me?”

She felt her chest tighten, and tried as hard as she could not to run at her mother, shove her out of her room and lock the door forever.

“Ma! That’s not fair,” was all she could manage.

“Not fair? You don’t even want to try that with me young lady. Your brother is up there with two front teeth missing—do you understand that he will have to have false teeth now

because of your careless behavior? Do you? All you do is sit around and read. I'm tired of it. It's time for you to participate, to be responsible, and act your age. Those books are not real life, Eleanor." And with that, she pulled the door behind her, leaving Eleanor to look despondently at her beloved books, wondering how she could do it, and knowing it would be the hardest thing she'd ever do. A whole month!

As she stepped on a stool to take *Anna Karenina* off of the high shelf and bury her deep at the bottom of her sweater drawer, she prayed her mother wouldn't notice. Her father would be on her side, as he always was, and at least, at the very least, she could sneak and have this one book to keep her company. Her breath came in short gasps, as she scanned all of her shelves, mentally noting each and every book, worried sick that even one might get lost or damaged. She had no idea what she'd do without them, couldn't bear the idea of thirty whole days dragging by—she'd be so terribly lonely. It would be an eternity.

As she stood in her room, she felt the sweat drip down her back, and waited for a breeze to come through, only it was didn't. Finally, unable to stand it, she took *Anna Karenina* out and crawled into her bed, determined to read as much as she could tonight before her mean mother took the only things she really loved away from her. The book felt heavy in her hands, and she opened the pages and put it on her face. She lay there inhaling it and then there was nothing. Just the faint sound of her brother crying out for their mother, a voice that sounded so far away, Eleanor barely knew it was there.

When the sky began to darken, she heard her father's tires crunch the gravel outside and quickly shoved the book under her pillow and sat up in bed. Waiting. Then, the door opened and both her mother and father stood there. More than anything, Eleanor wanted to run to her father and have him hug her, but he looked angry and so she didn't move.

“Daddy, I’m really, really sorry!” she started.

Her father shook his head, and even though he looked handsome in his dark suit and the pink tie she gave him for Father’s Day, he did not give any sign that he would accept her apology or help her get out of this predicament. Her mother had that hard look on her face, like a mask, and both she and her father recognized it.

“Eleanor, you’ve got to watch out for your little brother,” he started.

“I know, but...”

“You know how much I love that you read, but you have to act responsibly.”

“She wants to take them for a whole month though!”

And with that, her mother stepped in, cardboard box in hand, and started pulling her books off of the shelf and dropping them in by the handfuls. She wasn’t being at all careful or keeping them in any kind of order, Eleanor noticed, feeling herself starting to shake.

“Ma!”

“Not one word, Eleanor,” her mother said.

“But they are mine!”

Her mother held her hand up, silencing her. Eleanor looked to her father again, waiting for him to say something. Her head started to feel fuzzy.

“But can I just say I’m sorry? I’m really, really sorry Ma.” Eleanor begged. “Be careful with them—please!”

And tears started coming, which neither affected nor slowed down her mother, who put the last of the books in the box and asked, “Is this all of them?”

“Lizzie,” her father whispered, but stepped back as she walked toward him, put the box of books in his hand, and closed the door.

Her room, now empty and scary, was no longer the place she most liked to be, and she could not imagine how she would last in this cave with nothing to keep her company. She continued to cry in frustration, deciding she would never forgive her mother. Or her father either. The day had turned upside down like the world's worst Dandelion book story, and while Eleanor knew she should be more concerned about Tru and maybe even feel bad about forgetting him, all she could think of was how unfair her wicked witch of a mother was and how much she would miss her books. Life was awful and it was no wonder she would rather read than *participate*, as her mother called it! Why would she when this sort of thing happened to her?

Just then her father came in, quietly, and said, "Time to get to bed, c'mon now." She was still crying, but obeyed, sliding her legs under the covers and wiping her nose on her shirt. Eleanor thought he might have a lecture for her, and she waited nervously for whatever he might say this night, worried that he might be mean to her, only he wasn't. He kissed her forehead softly and said, "Goodnight Ellie-Belle." That was all.

When he got to the door, he turned and added over his shoulder, "I noticed that *Anna Karenina* wasn't in that box." Then he was gone.

And with that, Ellie, remembering her treasure, pulled it out from under the pillow and held the heavy book close to her chest, imagining that she was once again back on a windy cliff with a man who was coming to her rescue and looked just like her father.