

4. JOY TALKS

You made me feel degraded. There is no other way to describe it. It's just the way that you use your words. What you say, and what you don't say. How you take my soul. You suck the life from me.

You use your words in the same way that you use your eyes. It is like a knife. You know where my heart is. And you cut around it and take it out. You leave me with nothing.

"Joy, you're being a little hard on me."

"You're lucky that I decided to meet you."

"If you're going to make these accusations, that's the least that you can do."

"Are you going to buy me dinner?" I ask.

"Why?"

"For all the things that you've got away with in the past. You could own up to this one thing."

She carries on, "I know that you want to shirk out on even this basic obligation. I think that's how you are. As long as you're getting what you want, you're this very calm person. You've spent your whole life trying to live like this."

I can't do anything else right now but write. You have made it that way. The caresses that you gave me froze on my neck so that they no longer made me feel tender. Your love only strangles.

It is how you look at me. You never give me a chance to escape that dwelling gaze. Even when I have escaped from you, my image has burned on your brain. You use it for what you will. Anything else that I might be, you neutralize by your kiss. Your lips kiss mine only to make me disappear.

That is why you are so cruel. You can do nothing better than describe cruelty. You claim that these are simply characters that you create. I know this to be different. This is how you want to world to be. You cannot disguise that you are a hater. You embrace only to destroy.

I wonder why you are like this. Even if I can figure how your mother must have been cruel to you, I realize that you have done everything that you can to nurture this side of yourself.

Even when I think that I have escaped your control, you bring me back in. That is how you control me. You make me think that I too desire to be hurt. So you dig your hands deeper into my soul and you crush me.

You fool so many with your cult of truth. You love the perfect proportions. You are attuned to the geometry of the spheres. This is perfect order. This is your heaven. And you fit people in their places like stars in a constellation. These are the jewels of your crown. And we all just sparkle in your eye. We are your fool's gold.

Joy and I get in a heated discussion about my writing.

Joy comments, "When you mention that 'she wants the same force to rip at her', it almost suggests that she enjoys violence against her person."

"I don't mean that literally. But there is something about the power of this man that attracts her. Even he does not understand the forces that affect him."

"But you are creating the attraction. You are saying that it is OK that she feels that way."

"I'm not saying that it is a good feeling to have. But it is real."

“But it is real because you make it real. You take these complex influences on her, and you try to boil it down to just that feeling that is tearing her apart. What are you really saying? That you like the fact that he feels this way towards her.”

“What if I am?”

“Then you are more violent than your character. Your character appears criminal for his feelings. You are a voyeur over those experiences. By presenting them in this way, you find pleasure in the cruelty. It is your regime. He is simply a pawn.”

She zeroes in on more details, “In one of your other books, the character is a witness to the murder of a woman by a swimming pool. You almost take delight in the detailed description of her strangulation. You offer a rundown of all the injuries to her body. It seems like a source of pleasure.”

“That is not my intent.”

“It is there in black and white in the second chapter of your novel. Why did you do this? Does it give you some kind of jollies to write this sort of thing?”

“I am suggesting that there are darker motives behind this seemingly innocent character. Since he often gets what he wants, he appears so easy-going. But if he was in a more stressful situation, these other characteristics would manifest themselves.”

She won't let me off the hook, “You adore those stressful situations. They are a totally artificial creation to extend your philosophy.”

I do what I can to defend my portrayals. “I think what I do is pretty close to the truth.”

“Audrey's attraction to the cop and to the ex-convict are equally despicable. Her confusion about her life is expressed as a fascination for abuse. Moreover, you portray her in a committed relationship, but you don't offer any scenes between her and the man who she is with. She rather casually dismisses the relationship so that she can pursue these bizarre attractions. She finds appealing the most transitory characteristics in the men that she meets. It makes her appear shallow and offers her no opportunity to develop a deeper relationship with another person.”

There seems that there is little that I can say to Joy. She steam-rolls me with her exposition. “You are reading yourself into my novel. That is who Audrey is. She really isn't satisfied with her life. She has accepted to go out with a man because he represents the same virtues that she associates with the work place. But she is beginning to see that these characteristics are flawed. She wants something more in life. If it takes an abusive situation to show her this, that means that the whole context of her life is like that. Her emotional life only indicates how screwed up everything else is in her world.”

“She works in a department store. She's not running with a drug gang.”

“It might as well be all the same. She has to look like a model everyday at her cosmetic counter. The job takes its toll. It demonstrates these illusions about her image.”

“That is exactly what I am talking about. You get into this fantasy about her. You practically have her screwing the guy on the glass counter.”

“You are taking this too literally. She finds the cop attractive because she is deep into the effects of her job on her. He only accentuates her desire for something better. He is abusive in his own way. But she finds that she is going along with that sort of thing. She is caught in a string of abusive interactions because that is what makes sense to her. Even the guy that she is

with exhibits the same kind of attitude. He is there for her. But he offers little real affection. He barely encourages her dreams for her life.”

“But you are making her susceptible to sexual attraction for these random men. You make it seem exciting. It is entirely voyeuristic on your part. She may have other emotions. She may be more nurturing. You just portray her as frustrated.”

“Joy, you have it wrong. You have to think about this differently. You are imposing your psychology on my character. This is how she deals with her reality. She takes an active role. She doesn’t wallow in her depression. She lets it yield to a more positive emotion.”

“That’s just another form of depression. If she is depressed, have her get treatment, not just accept a night on the town with a psychotic.”

“Get treatment. You are imposing psychological brainwashing on Audrey. It’s already bad enough that she has to deal with the shit at work. You are adding interrogation and drugging to her negative influences. And you are the one who is blaming me for manipulation?”

“What are you afraid of therapy for? Do you have your own problems. That is no doubt that this is the basis of your fascination for sociopath behavior.”

“I am making social commentary. You are trying to dull that commentary. Do you have such a love for the mundane in our existence.”

“Mundane the fact that she has to get a job.”

“You should be the one who questions her job. She is expected to look the life of luxury when she greets men from her counter. She really doesn’t have much hope of escaping her fate. She had a wave of excitement when she first started this job. But now she seems trapped by it. It really doesn’t provide her much hope of advancement.”

“She could grow with the company.”

“Look where your criticism is taking you. You attack my portrayal. But you totally accept the demeaning role of her job. If she had the opportunity for a career that might accentuate the more creative aspects of her personality.”

“She could work on those things herself. You could offer her friends who might encourage her more.”

“She doesn’t have those friends because her job has encouraged her to be competitive about her image. She is in her early thirties, and she is just waking up to the fact that she has been lost in this myth.”

“So you send in a psycho to rescue her.”

“It just accentuates her situation.”

“Situation nothing. You don’t portray her in a developed way. So you really don’t offer her the chance to better her lot.”

“You are fostering these illusions about the individual. She has been rewarded in the past for being the way that she is. Even when she has obtained bonuses at work, it is to tell her that she is the picture perfect model. She believed that reward system.”

“She could sign up for the executive program. Anything to get her out of the situation that is your creation. She could take classes at college.”

“She’s not that kind of person. She derives excitement from experience not from thinking about things in her head. That is also part of her situation.”

“But if you wrote about something different, that would be an alternative influence.”

Joy is trying to set herself up as a literary critic. Go to it! My character is not going to be someone other than who she is. Those are the conditions of my portrayal. I am sorry that I can't oblige her wishes. This is my story, not hers. If she wants to write a novel, let her go do it.

"The buying public is not sympathetic to the portrayals that you offer. It is just too obtuse. People want to read about real characters with emotions such as theirs. If a woman works retail, they want to see the kinds of satisfaction that she gets in making a big sale. They want to see her in a redeeming relationship. They want her to be able to escape her condition. They don't want to accept your deterministic portraits. Real people don't drink their troubles away. If they do, that is a psychological problem, and it can be treated."

I refuse to surrender my portrayal to a feel good depiction of a dead end situation. This is real. If Audrey is turned on by these mysterious guys, that is the story. I would like it to be different myself. But there's not intellectual puzzle. That is what makes her tick. The guy who she is with makes her feel intimidated. That is the way that it is.

Joy holds off on the rest of her criticism for a few days. This gives me the chance to get back to my writing. Our discussion has influenced me to some degree. I realize that I have emphasized the risky side of Audrey's behavior. But this is entirely the character of her lot. Her work offers her health care and a meager retirement. But it has barely satisfied her dreams. And she no longer knows how to do this. She has been raised on a childish gratification. When she was younger, she had loads of guys who were interested in her. She could pick and choose. And her job enabled her to satisfy her basic wants. It kept her deep in the game.

She is older, and those desires really can't satisfy in the same way. She doesn't want to pass her evenings watching movies with boring guys. She wasn't meant for that. And her job really doesn't offer her any satisfaction. She has fantasy. And if her fantasies are mixed with a bit of danger, that only means that she is straying from the straight and narrow.

Joy is ready to take me on again. We meet at our favorite café for more dialogue.

"You imply that Joy is affected by some rough stuff in her history. But you make light of those influences. You almost encourage that sort of things so that you can derive some kind of pleasure from love of the outre."

I ask, "What are you getting at?"

"You pass over the abuse in her life. Or in anyone's life. You abstract the real hurt so that you can engage the reader in this psychological puzzle. It's just one move in the whole game that you are constructing."

"I still don't know what you are talking about."

"It's your story within a story. But this is the real part. There are men who get off on hurting women. There is nothing interesting about that kind of behavior. You almost suggest that it is glamorous. It is all part of a process of exposing the psyche. You've turned it all into some kind of intellectual striptease. Do you even realize what you are doing?"

"It seems that you are only encouraging what you criticize. You are the one who is using the word striptease. There is no tease at all in my portrayal."

"Come off it. You portray these two psychotic men. She should run from them. Instead you tease the reader with her interest in them. There is no excuse for what you are doing."

"It is a good story. You don't know what she is going to do."

"She is going to follow one of the psychos, and he is going to threaten her. And maybe

the other psycho is going to come to her rescue.”

I haven't completely thought out that resolution. But it does sound like an interesting development. I feel that I can only take so much more of Joy's brilliant suggestions. I need to get back to work.

All this thought about my book seems to be interrupting the creative process. I started with a clear idea about my story. Now I feel all blocked up. Audrey had appeared as a minor character. She was the first one to engage these two male characters. But I really didn't have any other plans to develop the character. Joy will have her comeback.

“You're killing her off before she has a chance to develop. I guess it's indicative of sort of sick side to your character. You drift from character to character because there is nothing stable in your life.”

I wonder what book Joy holds close to her heart at this moment. Things are not going to develop as she hopes. This is a mystery novel. I want to stay in the genre.

“There is no mystery. Just a refusal on your part to ask the basic questions of life.”

“I'm trying to write an entertaining book.”

“You can't even tell a story without messing with the time line. You're always drifting off to some sick fantasy.”

“I want to reveal the deeper motivation of the characters.”

“Your deeper motivation is only their psychosis. It is simply another excuse to give into your own depravity.”

I want to write without her interference. I like the give and take of the characters that I have created. The situation have a magic that bring them to life. It is not simply my creation. These people really are alive. It is as if I have made these ghosts live and breathe on their own.

And so I want to continue to tell the story. People want to believe that there dreams mean more than they do. That is the type of characters I have created. I want to be free to explore their motivations. I am not dwelling on their psychoses. But I do not want to sugar-coat their motivations either. I want to create real people.

“Why all the preoccupation with fantasies and jumbled up narration?”

“You're the one who finds the characters all mixed up. So their perceptions are all mixed up too.”

I am trying to get at the role of the author who is writing this story. In a sense, he is a character as well.

Next to me is a new book in an unopened package. The world around me has to change to reflect what is in the book. Then I will write the book about my experiences. And the book that I write will be exactly the same as the book in the package. I know this is a fact.

Audrey can't sleep. She is a little afraid that her insomnia is coming back. The more that she concentrates on trying to get to sleep, the harder that it becomes. She lies on the bed with her eyes open. She is afraid that if she gets up that she is denying her ability to sleep. She doesn't want to give in that easily.

She feels the need to use the washroom. She realizes that this is just an excuse. But she pretends that she will feel calmer when she gets back in bed. She pulls the covers over herself and closes her eyes.

Maybe it's the job. She imagines herself peering off into nothingness. The counter where

she works is on the lower level. There is not a lot of foot traffic. She feels that she is locked in an eternal emptiness.

It's not as if she needs to man to gratify her needs. Her fears are real and part of her character. They are so deep that she can't just massage them away.

She imagines a man lying next to her. She moves closer to get some of his warmth. She wants to feel like this all over.

The night is lonely. It aches with its solitude. That is why she cannot sleep. She cannot get to the end of the story. There the night will stop its cries.

She tries putting her hands over her eyes. The room is dark, but it seems all ablaze to her. She feels that she is on fire. It is unbearable.

She pulls off the covers. She feels a chill. She tries to lie perfectly still.

“You don't let your characters breathe. They just exist in your head. You don't put them in real places. There is hardly any development. They work, but there is little action with coworkers. The characters never have real families. It is just you in drag. Or you in a playpen. It is all one and the same story.”

“No one wants to read about the boring jobs that the characters do. And they don't have any families to speak of.”

“Are they drifters? Where do these people exist? In a desert. The desert of your mind.”

“That sounds cute.”

“That's what it seems like.”

Indeed it does. I try to have them escape the desert hideaways. But they are all on a different journey. And I cannot pull them back from their path.

Audrey wishes that she had gone out for a drink after work. Then she might feel more like sleeping. She has always worried about turning into a lush. Needing a drink every night just to quiet down. Needing a few more to get to sleep. That was never a real danger on her part.

She hates feeling like this. She doesn't feel ready to examine her life. Not at this time of night. Everything would just make more sense if she could get to sleep. That is what she is trying to do.

She turns over to the other side of the bed. This contradicts her usual sleeping style. But she is willing to try anything.

She doesn't want to feel that this sleep thing is anything more than it is. Her life seems at a stand still. But that is all an illusion of the night.

“Make her do something to change her life. Don't leave her paralyzed in this permanent insomnia. You're letting her sleep-walk through her life.”

“She has to live with her feelings. If you resolve them too easily, you lose the magic of the portrayal. That is what makes it seem real. You just can't manipulate it.”

“Your villain is a most calculated sort, ‘I saw you standing there alone’. Of course, she claims that she is waiting for someone. That isn't going to stop the deviant. He just wishes her partner away. He swoops in to do his damage.”

“That is how it happens.”

“And your audience prays for just that resolution.”

“I have to move along the narration. Something new has to happen.”

“You could let her develop on her own. She doesn’t need a catalyst.”

Audrey lies naked on the bed. She wants to cry out. It is like a nightmare. Words fail her.

For a long time, I felt paralyzed about my writing. My words seemed to fail me. Then I had revelation about my life. It was as if a lightening bolt had struck me. My silence ended.

Now I weave this tale of mystery. Audrey takes these steps into the dark waters. As she bathes herself in danger, her identity becomes more and more precarious.

“You have acquired your voice by making others mute. That is your role as a storyteller. You have so much to say, because you are unwilling to listen. You just want to tell your own tale and that is it”

Joy continues to criticize me, “Audrey is an excuse. Another figment. And she only has life insofar as she gives in to that same fantasy again and again. She explores her world only when she is sexual. You have reduced her to pure image.”

“She is alive!”

Audrey wrestles inside with her demons.

“What do you want from me?”

“I want something that you don’t want to give anyone.”

“What is that?”

“Your soul”

How can she explain soul? If she can’t touch it. It is her will to live. What excites her beyond just going through her emotions.

“I can’t give you my soul if I don’t have it for myself.”

“Just go through the motions. Do what I want you to do. Then you will realize what you have lost.”

“I don’t want to degrade myself.”

“Shame is the beginning of knowledge.”

“Shame is based on doing something that you don’t really want to do.”

“But it could seem exciting at the time.”

“Like kissing a creep.”

He smiles.

“You continue to make it seem as if dangerous behavior is attractive. It is simply dangerous.”

Joy may have a point. But that is the lesson that Audrey needs to discover on her own. Neither I nor Joy can tell her in which direction to travel.

Audrey is not a kid any more. She is not going to give up life for a spark of magic. She wants to believe the promise of something more. She needs something tangible.

For now her only consolation is a lovely dress that she saw in one of the boutiques in the mall. When she finally buys the dress, she seems so excited. The only way to realize this feeling is a night on the town. But after meeting her friend for dinner, she soon realizes the limits of his company. She feels abandoned. As she passes a mirror on the way to the bathroom, she notices how great the dress looks. She feels as if she is wasting her life. She has tried to make something out of it all. And this is her lone comfort.

When she walks back to the table, she holds her head erect. If she is a little miffed by it

all, she is not going to let it show.

When she gets home she lays the dress on her bed prior to hanging it up. She is reminded how much she wanted tonight to be perfect. The fact that the dress lies there lifelessly underlines how badly it has turned out.

Audrey is not going to cry. She feels too old for that. She wants something more for those long days spent at the counter. If only her life had more of a promise. As she puts the dress on its hangar, she wonders if it will finally have its day. She is ready to shine.

In her mind, she is the belle of the ball. She twirls around as everyone has his eyes on her. Her smile becomes large just imagining such a moment. She can feel herself lost in the waltz.

In the night, she returns to the funerary tones. She doesn't want to turn the light out. She doesn't want it to end this way. Audrey waits until the fatigue is at the point of knocking her out. Her eyes are heavy. All that she can do is fall asleep.

She had hope for more than this. And in her sleep, she is able to recover some of her dream. But the next day, she is again ready to play to the hilt.

She puts on her short, pleated black skirt, her flats, and her rust-colored shiny blouse. Over the blouse, she wears a cream colored vest. She finds some stunning violet-colored earrings to go along with the outfit.

As she is displaying the colognes on the counter, she notices a man checking her out. She looks up and stares in his eyes. Then she smiles.

He kisses her and touches her in a most provocative way. She surrenders herself to a summer breeze. His hands know no bounds. She sighs.

She goes back to the display. Then she arranges her hair.

"She is lost in her imagination. She is just setting herself up for more disappointment."

"I don't think she sees it that way. She has to have some satisfaction even if it's only for now."

"Look how you have her trapped. The very thing that she wishes for is what destroys her."

"But it is something."

"You offer her nothing long term. And you find real pleasure in her infidelity. It gives you more opportunity to condemn her."

"I depict her experience."

"You portray her this lusty whore who can't control her appetites."

"She does feel a sense of desperation."

"But you gloat over her needs. You are very much of a bastard towards her."

Joy hopes by her criticism of me that she is gradually wearing me down. It only temporarily takes its toll. I have a story to tell and it will be told no matter what her attempted interference.

"There are many ways that you could tell the same story. You have decided that your method is motivated by some kind of deep necessity."

"I wasn't looking for anything long term," he tells her. "I'd just like you to come back to my place for a few drinks."

For a long while, she believed that trust went hand in hand with fidelity. And it took a

long while to develop both. He is trying to push that time line. What he wants is immediate. She is a little afraid by his abruptness. What can this possibly mean in a week? How will he act tomorrow morning.

"I really can't."

She wants to meet him. She wants him to ravish her in his apartment. She can sense the risk. What if she isn't heard of again? She doesn't even have any friends to tell about this. She could discuss it with one of the girls at the store. She is feeling little crazy about it all.

He won't let up. He is pushing hard. She can feel that she will lose her chance if he doesn't act fast. She adjusts the button on her blouse. She is trying to keep it all together. Time is fast catching up to her.

She wants more of a life than these hard men. She wishes that they would not put up such a front. It is so hard trying to break down that outer shell.

She backs out at the last moment. She lets her better judgement rule the day.

Alone again at night, she tries to second guess herself. She really did mess up. Even when she is by herself, she eats like a bird. So she can't eat her problems away. There is a carton of ice cream in the freezer that hasn't been touched since her ex was here. She has to survive on a meager diet of worry and hindsight.

Joy interjects, "What is she going to do next. She is slowly killing herself."

"Do you propose rescue?"

"There could be something more in her life. She could read or do charity work. Make a difference to someone else."

"That seems so altruistic. I wonder where such impulse originate. In your head?"

Joy is not ready to defend her own life. This is how things have to be in her mind.

She adds, "I'm not trying to blame you. It's just that you can't possibly understand."

I understand only too well. Life offers problems without solutions. And that is Audrey's life. She has discovered the unsolvable dilemma. Everything in her life speaks to that problem. But it is so much larger than anything that might liberate her. She is going to try to open her heart for what it is worth.

"You have a simple story. And you're going to find a way to destroy it. It's how you write. Audrey will never be a flesh and blood character."

"Because she's a character in a novel. Try as I might, her reality is based on your beliefs about her. And if you refuse to challenge your beliefs, you can never understand what motivates her to be what she is."

"It all goes back to innocence. You believe it to be more than it is. Audrey is getting older. She is no longer the ingenue in the sports car. So the risks are different. And the returns are different. In your mind, that makes her desperate, not wise."

Joy always has an answer for me.

I need to take my story back. I need to be alone with my Audrey. I need to go to the department store that was an inspiration.

I show the store clerk my manuscript. She acts very patronizing towards me.

"I am married," she tells me.

"I just never saw a ring." Her hands are long and thin.

"You're trying to hit on me."

“I haven’t asked for your phone number. I just want you to read my book.”

“Is it published? Could I buy it somewhere?”

“I am writing it as we speak.”

She twists up her face.”

“And I am in it?”

“Not literally.”

“Is your character single?”

“Yes.”

“And you’d like to sleep with her.”

The clerk does not understand. If she is indeed married, she seems to do everything that she can to get involved in my story. I am flattered by her attention. I am waiting for that alarm bell that will awaken me from my dream.”

“So you found me attractive and wanted to put me in a story.”

I can hear her inviting me to a hotel. There is a hotel near here. I wouldn’t mind spending the night with her. Joy is right. I am getting carried away.

“I didn’t exactly put you in the story.”

“You never are going to get this published.”

“I’d like to.”

“It sounds weird. I don’t read much. I love movies. I’m sure that you can tell that by looking at me. But I hate to read. My husband reads a lot. You could meet him.”

After we have sex or before. Or could he watch?

Joy feels the need to interrupt even if this is really my life.

“You always have these degrading comments to add.”

“It’s how I think.”

“Wow!” she says. “No sophisticated explanations. Just pure smut.”

“I’m not really like that.”

“Tell me what you want to say. That you’re gentle in the bedroom.”

“I’m gentle all the time.”

“Unlike your characters.”

I want to get back to talking about the shop clerk. I really want to find her. I have this feeling that one kiss, and she will reveal all her secrets.

“One kiss and I will reveal all my secrets.”

He stares at Audrey.

She informs him, “It’s not going to happen tonight. But you can fantasize about it all the time.”

“I’ve passed this counter many times with the idea of saying something to you. But each time I’ve been afraid. For once in my life, I have the nerve.”

“None of this makes any sense. This guy who has been watching her isn’t the shy type.”

“Joy, now you are being literal. He isn’t telling her the truth. He is trying to set her at ease so that he can seduce her.”

I wish that Audrey could read what I write about her. I wish that she could hear my conversations with Joy. Then it would all make sense. I want to find the shop keep. I could show her what I have put together. She might be able to suggest something that I am missing.

Joy has become such disturbance. Audrey is ready to go to the next stage. But I send her back to her room because I am afraid of offending Joy. Audrey would do this so easily.

“No, she wouldn’t. She wants her guy to talk to her about his stock portfolio or his new house. She cannot deal with one more dissipated guy.”

Audrey feels the wind going out of her sails. She wants someone to send her off into the heavens again. She wants to feel the summer wind.

Audrey leaves work early. She goes to the park near her house and watches them float sailboats in the lake. Tiny toy boats on string. That is her life. It is an adventure. But she never wants to get too far from shore. That is where her faith comes in. She wants to feel the tug of the string.

“You finally admit that what she wants is faithfulness.”

“She wants passion. She wants someone to upset her placid life. She needs to see that she has been doing this too long. It won’t hurt if she just stops.”

“If she stops, that could prove to be fatal. She has to be gradual about it all. She needs a plan.

The man keeps coming back to her place of business. She wants to tell him to stop. She just feels exposed working in the public eye.

“You need to quit doing this.”

“I’d quit if you came back to my place.”

“I went with you once. You were too rough.”

“You slapped me around. You pushed me. I just followed a script.”