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She chose the book because it was the only one in the tiny apartment without a title like Evidence or Contracts.

Had she noticed its title before picking it up, she might have rejected it too. Such an awful title. Who would want to kill a mockingbird? A grackle maybe, or a buzzard, but why a mockingbird? There was nothing worth watching on television, her husband wouldn't be home from the law library for hours, and it was too early to go to sleep.

So, she sat down on the futon and began reading: "When he was thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm broken badly at the elbow." Oh, God! she thought; a story about a teenaged boy told by a little sister with a ridiculous name — Scout. What kind of girl's name was that?

When her husband walked in at midnight, she was still reading. "Why isn't the bed made?" he asked, making no attempt to conceal his annoyance. "I'm whipped!"

"I was reading and lost track of time."

"It's a mistake for you to stay up this late."

The next morning when the alarm clock beeped at 5 a.m., she remembered her husband's words. She worked the breakfast shift at Denny's before going to her job at Walmart, and she had never adjusted to that 5 a.m. start to her day.

"Shut that alarm off. I've got a Saturday seminar at nine and I want to get some sleep between now and then!" he said, his voice muffled by the pillow he had put over his head to block the light.

She dressed in her Denny's uniform inside the closet to keep the light from bothering him and grabbed clothes to change into later for her shift at Walmart.

"Bring home some milk, will you? There's barely enough for my cereal — and buy me some *real* corn flakes this time. I don't like that cheap generic stuff you've been bringing home."

All the way to Denny's she repeated over and over, "Milk and corn flakes, milk and corn flakes." She did their shopping at Walmart at the end of her workday, but sometimes she was so tired she couldn't remember what he had asked her to buy. When she got to Denny's, she wrote down "milk and cornflakes." She always made a list, even if there were only a couple of things on it.

After work that evening she found a note on the table. "I'll be late studying again tonight. Don't wait up."

She put the milk in the refrigerator and began washing the dirty dishes he had left. There was lipstick on one mug, and she guessed that he and his moot court partner must have worked together at the apartment again. When the dishes were washed, she got out the big box of generic corn flakes she had bought and filled a bowl for her supper, knowing that unless she ate them her attempt to be thrifty would be wasted money. She got a free breakfast every morning at Denny's and made it last all day. Hard as she tried, she didn't seem to earn enough to last between paychecks.

She was eager to resume reading, and within a few pages, she reached the point where Atticus told Jem that it was a sin to kill a mockingbird. Miss Maudie explained to the children what their father meant: "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy ... That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird ... "Ah! she thought to herself, now I understand.

At ten o'clock, she stopped to make out the bed so it would be ready whenever her husband got home, then propped herself on pillows. Reading about Atticus Finch made her proud of her husband's decision to go to law school. It also made her feel good about herself, like working at Denny's and Walmart to support the two of them while he went to school was important.

When he finally got home, he asked, "Are you still reading that book?"

"It's really good. Have you read it?" she replied.

"Nope. Our civil procedure professor told us we needed to read it, so I bought the stupid book — like we have time to read novels! When he told us we wouldn't be tested on it, I quit reading. I need to take it to school with me at the start of next semester and sell it to some freshman. I think he assigns it to every incoming class."

"But you would like it. It's about a trial lawyer who — "

"Don't start thinking you know all about trial law just because you've read a few pages from a story book."

"I don't. But surely your professor wouldn't have asked you to read it unless he thought you might learn something. This lawyer takes a case that no one else wanted, which was really brave — "

"And stupid. You can't build a lucrative practice representing indigent defendants that all the people in town with enough money to pay a lawyer want to see convicted!"

"But it was the honorable thing to do."

"If you had any idea about the real world business of practicing law, you wouldn't presume to lecture me on legal ethics. Turn out the light so I can get some sleep."



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The Woman Who Loved Atticus

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The next morning was Sunday — her one day off — and she was looking forward to the two of them doing something together. She slipped out of bed and sat down at the table where a band of sunlight allowed her to continue reading her book without turning on a lamp and disturbing her husband. She cried when she read what Miss Maudie told Jem, "I simply want to tell you that there are some men in this world who were born to do our unpleasant jobs for us. Your father is one of them." She thought she was beginning to understand why her husband was studying so hard to become a lawyer. She tried to picture him sitting outside the jail to keep the mob away from Tom Robinson, but for some reason she could not quite imagine her husband doing that.

While she was trying to picture Atticus with her husband's face, he awoke and began pulling on the jeans he had dropped by the side of the bed the previous night.

"Good morning," she said. "What are we going to do today?"

"I don't know what you are going to do, but I'm going out to get a paper and then coming back here for a shower before going to the library for the day."

"What time will you be back? It's so pretty outside that I thought maybe we could ride our bikes later."

"You must think law school is easy, like those art classes you took before we got married. It's not, and I don't see why you can't be supportive about my studying." With that, he walked out of the apartment. An hour later, he was back with a large Starbucks coffee. When he left 15 minutes later, the cup was still on the counter where he had set it. Intending to put it in the trash, she found that the cup was nearly full, and she could not help thinking how long she had stood at the cash register at Walmart to earn the amount of his unfinished coffee.

He's just stressed by finals, she told herself as she made up the futon and settled at one end to read. Within an hour she had finished the book and closed the cover with regret, hating to say farewell to Atticus. It was only midmorning, so she added some milk and sugar to her husband's coffee and put it in the microwave to reheat. The first sip wasn't bad, so she carried the cup to the futon and picked up the book she had just finished. She scanned pages until she found the passage where Miss Maudie told Aunt Alexandra, "Whether Maycomb knows it or not, we're paying the highest tribute we can pay a man. We trust him to do right. It's that simple." That was her favorite part of the novel, she decided. When she finished drinking the coffee, she hid the book in the bottom of her lingerie drawer. She hoped that by the beginning of the next semester her husband would have forgotten about his plan to sell the book to a freshman.

She turned on the television to help the time pass while she waited for her husband to return. Flipping channels, all she could find was an old movie, and it was in black and white. She hated black and white movies, but there seemed to be nothing else to watch, so she paused. It only took her a minute to real-

ize that the film was *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She quickly caught up with the plot and was mesmerized by the actor playing Atticus. Why had she never heard of Gregory Peck? His modest demeanor and underplayed strength were perfect. No wonder she had been unable to see her husband as the courageous small town Southern lawyer.

When the movie ended, she wanted to find someone who could discuss the story with her, but she didn't really know anyone except people at work and a couple of guys her husband had brought to the apartment to study with when he first started law school. She had never been to the law library, but she decided to surprise her husband with a visit. He needed a break from so much studying.

Outside the building she was lucky to meet one of the law students she knew, and he helped her find the library. She was excited, thinking how surprised her husband would be to see her. She spotted him, studying with a pretty woman that she assumed to be his moot court partner. As she walked toward them, her husband leaned toward the woman and kissed her. She froze, not wanting to be seen, then backed out of the room and began running, stopping only when she reached their apartment.

Once inside, she expected the tears she had fought to finally overtake her. Instead, she closed her eyes and thought of Atticus. She suddenly knew why she could not picture her husband sitting in the chair outside the jail. He was never going to be the kind of lawyer that people trusted to do right. It was that simple.

Her paychecks were in her purse, since her husband had left before she'd had a chance to give them to him. Two weeks' pay from Denny's and Walmart was enough to rent something cheap until she could decide what to do. The car was hers, and it was big enough to hold everything she wanted to take with her, mostly her clothes and the iron and ironing board, which she was fairly certain her husband would never miss. She put both bikes on the car's bike rack because they'd been a gift from her parents, but he could keep the tacky furniture bought at Goodwill and the pots and pans and dishes and towels they'd been given as wedding gifts. He could even have the flat screen television she had made the payments on for two years. She only wanted one thing that belonged to him — the book he would never bother to read anyway.

Reading that book had been the happiest hours she had spent inside that apartment in months. The woman she had been before she met Atticus Finch was not the same woman she was now, for now she knew what kind of man was worth loving and what kind of man needed to be left behind. As Miss Maudie had said, it was that simple.



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