

In this scene, Hope Townsend—an emotionally complex caregiver working in a nursing home—finds herself immersed in a kitschy relationship self-help book she picked up at a garage sale. As she tends to her elderly charge, Mavis, the book’s over-the-top promises and gendered cliches spark both amusement and introspection, The author, Brooks Nixon, initially appears as a caricature of pop psychology—but his story will later collide with Hope’s in unexpected and transformative ways.

Judging from the picture on the cover, this book couldn’t have been written past 1985. Mr. Nixon sported a green polo shirt, a pastel yellow sweater knotted over his shoulders, and the dubious tight curls of a likely perm which, together with his crooked teeth and heavy arched eyebrows, created the overall impression of a man in a goofy disguise.

Before she read a whole page, Hope could already sense the arresting rhythm of prose that made these books so popular. The author started by firing off a barrage of probing questions and then went in for the kill with his outrageous promise. Hard to believe anyone would fall for such blatant marketing hocus-pocus. She plowed through the book’s prologue hungrily, eager to scoff at its trite and patronizing presumptions.

Are you tired of dead-end relationships?

Do you seem to keep dating the same immature men over and over?

Do you long for a meaningful connection and fear you’ll never find one?

Do you secretly suspect that all men are pigs?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you are not alone.

But I have good news for you! In buying this book you have taken the first step toward finding the deep, lasting commitment you deserve. Congratulations!

The foot of the bed jiggled a little as Mavis kicked at her covers and strained her ragged vocal cords. “Delma?”

“Delma’s at her house, Miss Mavis. Do you need something?”

“Toilet.”

“Okay.”

Mavis had worn adult diapers for over a decade now and these bathroom trips of hers usually fell into one of two categories: *too late* or *false alarm*. But she vehemently insisted on making the trips, despite what an arduous task it had become for all parties involved. Retaining this mundane habit of self-care represented her final grasp at a long-gone autonomy, one supposed. As the two of them lumbered and heaved their way into the handicapped-equipped facility, Hope made herself a silent promise; that if she ever reached this stage in life, there would be no more fighting. She would graciously lie back and let the robots do all the work.

This time it was a false alarm. The trick about false alarms was not acknowledging their falseness; she sat on the edge of the tub for about fifteen minutes, hummed a few old country songs, then wasted a clean wad of toilet paper and a flush before helping the old woman back to bed.

Through my work as a relationship coach I have heard countless stories from frustrated women like you over the years. I began to notice a common thread between these stories, and I set out to break the discouraging cycle of predictable patterns once and for all. Let me tell you,

the response to my 3M system has been overwhelming! I receive hundreds of thank-you letters a day from the women who've attended my seminars. And now, this valuable information is available in convenient book form. With the help of my simple strategies and concrete tools, you too will soon learn to become the top priority in any man's life with very minimal effort.

A labored sound emanated from Mavis's side of the room, followed by a long stream of whispered expletives.

“What's wrong Miss Mavis, can't sleep?”

“Urrrrrrr...umph...God Dammit...”

“Well...okay...I'll take that as a yes. How about if I go get you some nice warm milk? Sound good? Hang tight, I'll be right back.”

As Hope swooshed by her, Mavis lifted a mangled finger and widened her eyes as though signaling a waitress.

“Hold that thought, love,” Hope shot back before slipping out (she knew it was a ridiculous thing to say to a senile woman, but she didn't want to risk having to endure another bathroom trip.

Hope couldn't tell one worker from another in the clanging steamy commotion of that huge kitchen, but they all clearly recognized her. Chaos parted like the red sea as four or five women of color in hairnets all scurried to get her whatever she needed with polite efficiency. The contrast between the drudgery of their undervalued positions and the cushiness of her own made her draw her shoulders in, seized by a sudden urge to shrink and disappear. After procuring the

Styrofoam cup of microwaved milk, she revealed her ulterior motive to the women, bookending it with gratuitous apologies.

"Sorry, I hate to be a bother, but is there any way I could use the phone? I just need to make one quick call. Sorry." A very pregnant custodian led her to the noisy break room, a place far less relaxing than the one she would return to.

The back of her neck became flush with every passing ring, and by the time Nathan's answering machine kicked on, a current of undefined resentment had reached her fingertips.

"What's up...this is Nate...leave a message..."

In the six months since they'd met, Hope had never once heard anyone refer to Nathan as "Nate". His roommate didn't call him that. The skate-boarding manager of the hotel where he worked as breakfast cook always clearly enunciated both syllables of his name. Perhaps certain privileged friends of his got to use the more familiar moniker? Hope wouldn't know. The only time she'd heard of his having any friends at all was when he'd needed an excuse to get out of one of their rendezvous ("*I gotta help a friend move*") or validation for one of his implausible claims ("*my friend worked there, it's owned by Neo-Nazis.*") Sometimes she wondered if they even existed at all, these chums of his. If they did exist, why couldn't she meet them? And if they didn't, why lie? In the end it didn't matter. No matter which angle she considered it from, his outgoing message still annoyed the hell out of her.

“Um...yeah...hi, *Nate*. It’s Hope...Nate. I’m almost done work and...just calling to remind you about picking me up....so...I’m off at six thirty and I’ll be waiting in the circle drive out front. Okay? I’ll see ya soon... I hope. Bye... ~~Nate~~.”

Back in the room, Mavis greeted Hope with a distrustful glare that actually made her feel a tad guilty about the length of her absence, even though she knew Mavis couldn’t care less (the look plainly didn’t mean *what took you so long*; rather *who the fuck are you*.)

“Okay, Miss Mavis, I brought that warm milk you asked for. Now, sit up and use your straw so it doesn’t spill. This’ll put you right to sleep in no time, you’ll see.”

“What the...oh, *Christ*. Son of a....”

“There ya go...that’s good...one more swallow...perfect. That should do the trick. Now. I’m gonna turn out the light again, but I’m still right here if you need me. Okay?”

“Ahhh...bugger. Lordy, lordy, lordy...”

“Goodnight, Mavis”.

“Hmmp.”

It never ceases to amaze me how a woman so smart, disciplined and calm when facing career challenges can still exhibit such poor judgment and lack of self-control when it comes to her romantic life.

Shouldn’t something as important as finding a partner for life merit the same razor-sharp focus and determination as plotting one’s vocational path?

The book reminded Hope of a favorite old story her grandfather used to tell. Once, at the Iowa State Fair as a kid, grandpa had seen a sign that said, “Learn to whittle, five cents to enter.” He’d stood in line for forty minutes clutching a nickel begged from his mother until finally a woman had ushered him into a tent with four or five other kids. There, a curtain had whooshed open on a scene that was, well, anticlimactic to say the least; a guy with a handlebar moustache was sitting there scraping away at a twig with heaps of shavings at his feet, repeating and repeating the same eight words in stone-faced monotone. “Never cut *toward* yourself... always cut *from* yourself...”

True, Hope hadn’t technically paid to learn Brooks Nixon’s 3M system, but the feeling of being duped echoed her grandfather’s story perfectly. She wished she could bring him back from the dead for a minute just to tell him about it.