

## A BOOK IS A SHELF OR NOT

She did not care much for books, either their contents or their designs. She had a job in a bookstore to help pay her university fees. Her father, a builder, had gotten his start by building book shelves for local profs. He now specialized in commercial interiors, and he had built the bookstore where she had just started working.

Her father and the owner of the bookstore were friends, not close, but friends because they played rugby in a local men's league. Since she had mostly grown up in her mother's household about 20 miles from the university, she did not know the bookstore owner. Her father had a charming way except with his kids. He was not very charming when she said that she really didn't like books and preferred to try to find a job as a waitress or a bartender. Her father was paying her tuition, and the bookstore was part of the financial plan. She met the owner and decided after a few minutes that she could manage the assignment.

The owner was a trust-baby but a responsible one. He had opened the bookstore with no illusion that he could ever make any money. Most years he broke even, and that was fine. He carried books from small presses, and he specialized in fiction and poetry by unknown but promising writers.

The space was modest but roomy enough for the design to include a coffee bar. The owner served a very dark coffee from a California roaster he had run in to when he was a student at Berkeley. He kept the selections to a minimum: a house coffee, an espresso and a latte. His coffee bar was popular among the locals who ranted about Starbucks and Beamers that were more interested in menus of coffee rather than the coffee itself. On some days he sold more coffee than books, and the hired help was more often employed in serving coffee, washing dishes and chatting with coffee drinker than with book readers.

The owner's new hired hand didn't mind the coffee-bar assignments since coffee was easier to deal with than books. The counter that her father built showed the coffee beans in glass enclosures, but the coffee-making machines were built into the wall behind the counter. It was a handsome arrangement and efficient except in the morning or late afternoon when perhaps as many as six or eight people were ordering coffee.

The owner, if he was in the store, always helped out at the coffee bar. She rather liked working with him because he seldom became agitated the way she did when customers hemmed and hawed.

She also liked working with him because he was slightly shorter than she was, actually he was small. She was conscious of her height especially behind the counter because to accommodate the glass-enclosed coffee-bean containers the counter was higher than the waist-level counters in most shops. When she placed a cup of coffee on top of the counter she found herself looking at most directly at the cup. Her father was tall but her mother was short, and she had inherited more of her mother than her father. She was happy, though, that she had her mother's face, a round Mediterranean face. When her mood was light, she had lush smile. Few people ever saw that smile.

The owner was sitting with a good friend. They tried to have coffee together every morning. They had known each other in Berkeley, and when the owner had decided to return to the town he had grown up in, he talked his friend into trying it for a while.

Local folks were known to talk about the relationship between the owner and his writer friend. They talked, rather whispered, in spite of the fact that they knew the friend had been married three times. They had a rather complicated relationship. The friend had shown up in town shortly after they had graduated from Berkeley, had met and married a young academic at the university and left town five years later when she took a better job at a famous private university. They had divorced, not because of any third-party hanky-pankiness but because she was ambitious and successful and he in his own way was ambitious but struggling as a writer. He moved to LA on the spur of the moment and fell in love with the city that everyone else hated. Much of the charm of LA was hidden away on side streets and back alleys, and for whatever reason his writing began to attract attention. He wrote essays about visiting small out-of-the-way galleries and studios, and the people who created in these spaces usually while holding down day jobs in the movie industry or in some ancillary field. He married again, a younger woman, who rented one of these spaces, was certainly ambitious enough but unfortunately lacked talent. The marriage was acrimonious and fell apart within a couple of years. In the meantime he was successfully peddled a short novel about growing up in a small town that had a high incidence of alcoholics and fundamental Christians, and while the book earned him some good reviews and some much-needed cash, it had more than anything else made it easier for him to sell his reviews and essays. Another marriage to an even younger woman had no more durability than his earlier marriages. By now, though, he had an agent and a degree of financial security that made his early middle-age life more comfortable.

He had remained in touch with the book shop owner. They talked once or twice a month. During those years the owner had traveled, published with his own funds two books of free-verse that reviewers pretty much ignored and tended to his investments (which was more fun than he had anticipated and which he had grown significantly). He told his friend he had decided to open a bookshop with a coffee bar in his home town, which in spite of a university had no interesting book shops. Why don't you resettle here, he asked his friend, and like other spur-of-the-moment decisions he did.

The owner had few friends – lots of acquaintances – but his friend had few problems meeting people. He was tall with a muscular but lean body, having pumped iron for almost a decade. His messy marriages had never caused him to over-indulge with food or booze or other nefarious ventures. Despite the whispers about their relationship the friend was often seen in public with divorced or single women and once in a while with students. He had crossed marriage off and his female relations seemed to be more casual than serious.

Her first morning behind the counter she met, well, more appropriately, waited on the friend. He asked for the house coffee, paid and thanked her and walked over to the table where he and owner always sat. And since he came in almost every morning she learned his name as he had learned hers. He was always friendly and asked about her classes and how the job was going. She kept the details of her life brief, and she soon knew more about him than he knew about her.

One morning the owner came over to the table as the coffee line had dispersed and said to his friend, she wants to know about your status.

---“My status?” the friend asked.

---“Your status”

---“I’m not sure I’ve ever been asked that question.”

---“So what should a I say?”

---“I’m more than 40 and growing older.”

---“She knows your age, not your status.”

---“OK, I’m not currently attached.”

That was truthful. He had several female friends but he was not sleeping with anyone at the moment.

---“What should I expect after you tell her I’m unattached?”

---I don’t know. You’ll have to wait to see.”

For the next several weeks he waited. They had their usual over-the-counter conversation, and nothing else worth noting.

---Am I expected to push this ahead? I’m not inexperienced in this regard, but I haven’t yet turned my charms on someone a quarter-century younger.”

---“I warn you,” said the owner, “she’s moody. The moods are not always visible. You might best let this thing ride. She has a boyfriend, and she’s often pissed off at him, as she appears to be this morning. Or perhaps at her dad. Or – don’t flip out over this – at you.”

Despite the fact that his long-time buddy never dated, he was smart and savvy about reading people’s moods.

---“At me?”

---“A possibility even though I doubt, since I know you as well as I do, you’ve done anything to deserve one of her mood attacks yet.”

The news for the friend was good. His long manuscript, a historical novel based on the life of a late-nineteenth-century writer whose papers resided in the university’s special collections. Up to this point he had read few historical novels, Gore Vidal’s *Burr* being the one that stuck in his memory. He had become fascinated with this little known writer only because his letters and journals were far more interesting than the fiction he wrote. He like the writer had an interest in design and had tried to figure out what it was about design that so was fascinating and at times inspiring. His papers were also full of drawings and sketches that unfortunately revealed no talent. The owner had read the manuscript several times as had two other friends on the architecture faculty. They had helped him to find a way to make the design question central to the story. It worked, the agent had no trouble placing it and the book was due out by the end of the year, nine months from now.

So the curious behavior of the young lady behind the counter was not of major concern, although he admitted only to himself he found deliciously attractive. He had to admit he enjoyed seeing her and missed her when he didn't see her. He remembered a phrase he had used in an earlier romance – you flew into my life and now I must fly out of yours. He couldn't decipher the mood business that his buddy picked up on without much effort. When she looked at him, she often held her gaze for seconds, far longer than she should have. He almost always turned away. On a scrap of paper he had written I tried/A new face/I couldn't let go.

A further complication, He had met a divorced lady closer to his age, and he was seeing her with some regularity. But it was moving very slowly. That was fine with him.

The out of the blue the woman behind the counter invited him to a party. He had never seen her so endearingly enthusiastic. He said yes. It was planned for the next night, and she would fill him in tomorrow.

---“So you're going?”

The owner already knew about the rendezvous when he sat down for morning coffee.

---“I guess so. I don't know the details yet.”

---“You will.”

On the way out she handed a note with the details. He was to meet her at the book shop that evening, and they would go together to the apartment. He did, and they walked to the apartment a few blocks away. She warned him that being college undergrads the attendees will be curious. And they were.

---“How about that coke?” she asked.

---“No coke, how about a beer?” he answered.

---“No, a coke” as that big smile broke out across her face.

Then he remembered one of the few times they had bantered at the book-shop coffee bar.

---“How about a date for a coke,” he had asked her.

---“You can't be serious,” she replied and then added, “Grow up!”

---“I did that and I didn't like it,” he had replied.

He began to laugh and sensed for the first time he was smitten. God damn, he thought. Fly away. Now.

They were seated across from each other with others whom he did not know spread around them.

---“What is the color of my eyes” she asked.

---“I don't know but I'm looking” was his answer. (He had always been afraid to look into women's eyes. From a distance between them he knew they weren't blue, maybe hazel.)

He felt embarrassed by the question, and the arrival of her boyfriend only added to the embarrassment.

He stayed a while longer, feeling more and more out of place, and when he decided to leave she gave him a hug and her address. A surprise to say the least. As he walked home he decided to write her and try to explain his feelings.

And he did.

When he was gone, phone messages had piled up. Even though it was still early, he decided he was in no mood to deal with what was behind those messages.

The next day before he left town for a week away and after he had dealt with the phone messages (and the anger of the divorcee) he wrote the woman behind the counter a letter. He wrote a very brief but honest summary of his life, he commented on the age difference, and then said if she was willing perhaps they could get together for an evening, just the two of them. He added his home phone number and that of the place where he would be staying for a week. He mailed the letter on the way out of town.

The divorcee had said to him the night she met him at a local bar

---“I think I’m going to like you.”

He had never heard anyone say quite that way. He was a nurse, not an RN, and worked in the hospital in a nearby town. She rented a house on a farm property outside of town. She was tall, statuesque, blond, upbeat, frisky and utterly mysterious. The opposite of the book-shop lady except for hair and mystery. They had not made love yet, and despite her anger this morning he knew they would. With the book-shop lady making love seemed remote.

Three days later the phone rang at near midnight in his borrowed quarters.

---“Hello.”

---“Hi, it’s me, you said I could call.”

---“Wow, I sure did, and I’m glad you did. How are you?”

---“I’m OK. A little tired. Lots of hours at the book shop.”

Then she rapidly reeled off

---“I got your letter, I loved it, I read it twice, I want to know when you’re coming back?”

---“Ah, I’m glad you read it, I wasn’t sure you would, and I’ll be back by the weekend.”

---“Good, can we get together?”

---“Of course. Do you want to call me?”

---“Here’s my number.”

Like a couple of high schoolers dancing around the what-do-I-say-next dilemma..

But she was suddenly very talkative, not as articulate as I thought she might be, but still full of things to say. He felt wobbly and lay down on the bed for the rest of the conversation. A half hour later they ended the conversation. He continued to lie on the bed, not knowing right from left, or up from down. At the end of the conversation she said the sooner you get back here the better. He thought of a line from a song, why did you have to go and say that?

It was a week before they had their rendezvous at his apartment. In the meantime he had spent a night with the divorcee, and they had done what he knew they would do - fucked most of the night. She said she liked his style. He had learned over the years to keep erections going a long time. He was sure she would invite him back, and he would come back. It was the most intimate conversation they had ever had, and yet he kept thinking what was missing in this conversation? There were gaps that he tried to get her to fill in, and she couldn't or wouldn't. He was glad that all the work on the manuscript was done because he certainly had no energy to work on it. The book-shop owner only chuckled when he described the past few days. The writer did not reveal to his friend the tentative agreement to meet the hired help in his apartment. It didn't matter, he knew.

On a beautiful, warm evening she showed up. She was not dazzling. She was dressed in a white, short sleeve blouse and shorts. Her hair was free flowing, and she wore no makeup. Her legs were shapely and muscular from years no doubt of riding bikes. It was a sexy body. She kissed him on the cheek, and he kissed her. Both were nervous, but that soon passed after he opened the champagne. She said she had never drunk much champagne, but she liked it. He said it was the main item in his diet. And they laughed about that. Then they fell into an embrace, and her kiss was like a bolt of lightning. Her breasts were firm but felt tingly. Her arms were firmly wrapped around his neck.

---“Are you going to feed me,” she said suddenly but quietly in his right ear.

---“Yes, when you're ready, but we need to go to the store across the street because you never told me what you like to eat.”

---“I don't really like to eat, but I need some sustenance, so let's go”.

They actually walked around the store for a long time. She knew more about food than she had let on. He was known to be a pretty good cook, and she must have known that, thanks, he speculated, to his buddy.

---“Is cooking to be a challenge tonight or something simple?” she asked.

---“Probably not up to a challenge,” he declared in all honesty.

They settled on shrimp, an avocado (for the green mayonnaise), some tomatoes and garlic (to sauté) and a baguette.

---“Should we get another bottle of champagne?”

---“Indeed,” she said.

---“Any dessert?” he asked.

She smile and shook her head.

The feast took about a half hour to prepare after they got back. She was handy in the kitchen, as he suspected after their walk through the store.

He cooked the giant shrimp in their shells in boiling water with peppercorns and lemon for a few minutes, and she cut the tomatoes and garlic into pieces and added them with olive oils to a sauté pan. The baguette was sliced and placed on the small table he had bought at Ikea during a prior marriage. She sat on a soft chair that he had inherited from his mother – he told her there was a story behind the chair but he could remember what it was.

---“Problem with old guys,” she said nonplussed.

He felt a bit less than nonplussed.

Her fingers were nimble in shelling the cooked shrimp. He took a picture with her permission. They shared their dreams, his being somewhat scaled down compared to hers. She wanted to make a name for herself, and he was about to say that doesn’t come without costs only to remind himself not to be the scolding, experienced senior partner. Always the problem in youth versus age, romantically speaking.

---“What’s your favorite body part?” she asked.

---“Legs,” he shot back

---“And yours?”

---“Feet!”

---“Feet, have you been staring at my feet instead of my best part, my legs?”

---“Well, yeah, but I really like my feet,” and she discarded her sneaks.

Never having considered feet, he was somewhat at a loss. This was a conversation much to his liking, though, no script, no rules, no commitment.

They moved from the table to the balcony where he laid out a pile of cushions over the concrete floor. They lay down next to each other and watched the sky. The sun was fading, the moon was rising, and a gentle breeze (seven stories up) kept the evening heat at bay. For a long time they watched without talking and only barely touching. The half moon was rocking on its backside, and was soon joined by the brightest of the sky’s objects.

In the engulfing darkness they embraced, and she slid on top of him. It became passionate and fierce. Her tongue was firm and everywhere. He had lost track of his.

They embraced, released, embraced, released in some kind of night-sky rhythm that caused her to say

---“This is crazy” and the cycle began all over again.

This was an explosion of feelings and yearnings that had been growing in each of them for months. She unzipped his jeans and then hers. She took his penis and put it on the lip of her cunt, and gently moved it back and forth. He put his hand where hers was as she filled his mouth with her tongue.

They both sensed something – they had gone as far as could go. They both let up, then she got up, dressed herself and began to gather her few belongings. It was completely dark, well past midnight, and he offered to drive her home.

---“No,” she said, “I’ll walk.”

---“But it’s...”

---“I said I’ll walk.”

Walk she did right out of his life.

Maybe once or twice after that she spoke to him, but the few times their paths crossed she ignored him. He was not as tore apart by losing her as he should have been. Only years later would he feel the loss. The reason was the divorcee. As the woman behind the counter faded from view physically (a different shift at the book shop) the divorcee occupied the space until she was arrested for shooting cocaine with her son. The writer had lived a messy life, but no drugs, and in the case of the divorcee he was so ignorant about drugs he didn’t know those absences, that mysteries, they were about the white stuff. Months later she called to say she was sorry, she had been seeing another guy while seeing him and was expecting in three months. He asked how she was doing physically and financially (he had lent her thousands of dollars), and she only responded that she was clean. That was good, he said, and they hung up.

Years later he had left the university town in part because his buddy had closed the book shop and with his millions had set up an ecological refuge in one of those threatened tropical regions. They still stayed in touch, now by instant messaging and other high-tech devices. The writer moved to a big East Coast where he could listen to jazz and write essays for several different magazines on subjects of his choosing.

In doing some research he ran across he was intrigued by reviews of book shelves. A little more digging revealed that a woman who lived not far, in the next city, was behind these creations. One model appeared to be suspended in thin air (by a series of wires and pinions on the wall side). Another was a shelf that was a triangle inside a triangle where one book was propped the vertical side, another lying flat on the horizontal side and a third along the hypotenuse, held in place by an ingenious and nearly invisible sleeve that the book actually slide into. Her most famous because it was the most avant-garde and because she had installed them throughout her house, as featured in *Architectural Digest*, was a thin, horizontal, heavily-starched fabric that ran the length of the actual book shelf, short or long, with slits cut about half way through the fabric, of varying widths, into which a book slide upright. In some cases there was only one slit for a three-foot-length shelf, and in others three or four slits. The fabric came in various colors and weaves. It caught the book-shelf world as well as the design world by surprise.

The writer had run across reviews of this book shelf described as post-next-modern. He did not recognize the name, but he came to attention when he saw her picture in an article about the

shelves. It was the lady behind the counter. Although he knew he still had longings, he was primarily interested in the designs. He found her email, sent her a note in which he explained who he was and what he was up to, and hoped for a reply. Weeks later while he was sitting in an airport a reply came. – polite, curt and mainly affirmative (she remembered him and liked his project). He continued his research, sent a few emails to keep her informed as to the progress, and then came a blistering and angry email demanding to know what he was trying to do, establish a friendship that never existed and bothering her with stuff that had nothing to do with her. Get lost was the conclusion. He had been told off once or twice in his life but never so thoroughly in five or six sentences. Now he knew the full brunt of a mood attack. Within hours the shock turned to recognition. He knew why he was still single, and the better for it.