

Night at the Bookstore

I encountered them at 4 am in the darkened café of the Barnes & Noble bookstore on 16th Street and Park Avenue, the one overlooking Union Square. They were nibbling on scones and sipping tea and coffee.

I had gathered a few of my favorite classics, as was my custom on my late night shifts, and stacked them on the floor. I had just sat down to enjoy a bit of reading. Next to me was the cleaning cart I wheeled through the store six nights per week, my trusty mop protruding from its yellow bucket.

The sound of voices in the deserted store drew my attention. I got up on my knees and peered through a gap on a shelf where the borrowed books had been. What I saw fascinated me because long ago, back in Cairo, I was a professor of literature. I spent most of my hours between the covers. Few know of my former occupation as I was never able to transfer my credentials to America when I moved here thirty-four years ago. I came with my darling Faridah, who departed this life eleven months and four days ago. Without her, reading classics has become my last love on Earth.

So, what was this strange entourage huddled together around a table eating day-old scones in the middle of the night? And how had they broken free from the bounded pages of their lives?

They seemed to openly quarrel with one another about their timeless struggles.

But I am getting ahead of myself. How was I, an intruder and spy, able to recognize this mysterious cast of characters, never mind join them?

I will try to make a long story short.

On the left side of the café table sat Madame Bovary. Next to her I recognized Holly Golightly, clad in a little black dress. The society girl carried on and on about her lovers and jewelry and her quest to live a Tiffany's life. At one point I heard the French Madame say, "Of all the icy blasts that blow on love, a request for money is the most chilling," but this comment was lost on Holly.

Balancing a scone in her hand, Holly then told Emma that "certain shades of limelight wreck a girl's complexion," to which Emma had no reply. The two turned away from one another with a bit of visible scorn.

On the opposite side of the table, Captain Ahab sat next to Holden Caulfield. As you can well imagine, the conversation was quite strained. I recognized Holden, of course, a character with whom I am well familiar.

The Captain wore black. He seemed to be troubled, focusing on a demon that was not there. He turned to Holden and said, "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me."

I then recognized a woman behind the counter fiddling with the espresso machine. Why, it was dear Scarlett O'Hara! In her strong southern accent she announced that the coffee was ready for serving, but this was clearly not the case. Holden looked at her. "That's something that annoys the hell out of me--I mean if somebody says the coffee's all ready and it isn't," he said.

Scarlett seems visibly annoyed but mentioned that she would think about the matter tomorrow.

I rested one foot on the cleaning cart that was my sworn attendant in the bookstore. Somehow, I kicked the rolling apparatus, which caught me off balance. A

hardcover book fell out of my hand with a thud. I hurriedly looked through my peephole. Not surprisingly, they were all looking in my direction. An investigative team was dispatched, and in moments Captain Ahab and Scarlett were glaring down upon me.

"What a cool liar you are," Scarlett said. I looked into her green eyes, none lovelier or more hateful, only to be interrupted by such strange words from the Captain:

"All my means are sane, my motive and my object mad."

I suddenly found myself lifted up by my shirt and dragged to the table by the Captain, the six novels balanced in my arms. Oddly, they did not interrogate me. Holly and Emma continued their lively tête-à-tête, and the Captain and Holden traded jabs into the wee hours.

The night had flown by and the light began to come over Union Square. I knew my dear friend Emily, the barista, was sure to arrive soon, and it would be back to the books for all of us. As the light shone through the window on 16th Street, I noticed the souls at the table growing visibly dimmer.

It was only a matter of minutes until the revelers would vanish back onto their alphabetical shelves. Suddenly, I became aware of the Captain's attention to my person. He made it plain that he sought to put together a crew for a great voyage commencing in Nantucket. An offer was made for my services, which I readily accepted in trade for immortality.

Call me Ishmael.

I write this now from below deck on the ship *Pequot*, bound for Cape Horn. I can just picture the look on Emily's face when she arrived for her shift that morning to find the café tables strewn with half-eaten scones and novels scattered about. I knew

that when she looked for me, she'd find only my mop and trusty bucket in the classical literature section.

Works Cited

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