

By Any Other Name

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Every Wednesday was library day. At first, I went with Mom and Dad, then later just Dad. Mom had to work evenings and I liked going in the afternoons when they would hand out juice boxes. When I was nine I was allowed to take my racer all the way to the library. Biking there was hard because it was uphill, but it made the ride back really fun.

One time I said I was going to the library, but went to my friend Dom's house instead. Furious didn't even begin to describe my parents when they realized I was not where I said I'd be. I was banned from the library for a month. After that, my mother would smell my hands. You see, the library had a very specific soap smell like nowhere else that came out from the pumps in pinkish white foaming glops. So my mom smelled my hands every time I came home to prove I had been there.

Today was a Saturday. The air was crisp on my cheeks and cold enough for a jacket. The smell on the wind reminded me of digging up carrots from our garden, caramel apples, and a special hot chocolate recipe my dad made every year right around Halloween.

I skidded to a stop and locked my bike up, weaving the clear blue rubber coated chain through the wheel and body, just like Spencer had taught me, so high schoolers wouldn't steal it. I stood up and brushed off any dirt and leaves for good measure. Warm air rushed past me and around me as the automatic doors opened. I never told anyone, but it always felt like those doors were like a book, and a grand story was welcoming you inside.

The frosted skylight made the whole library bright. Before anything else though, I first glanced at the checkout desk. It was *her*. The mean lady with the pink stripe in her hair sat in the swivel chair. She hated me. Actually, she hated everyone. But she did like cat pictures. There wasn't a chance I was checking out with her. If anything made me not want to come back to the library, it would be her. So new goal; to stay here long enough that maybe someone would switch places with her. Miracles could happen, after all.

I headed over to the graphic novels, my usual first stop in my rounds. There were a few new books. One looked like it had a pair of beavers as superheroes, which was cool, but I'd read most everything else. I glanced up. Nothing for the *Hazardous Tales* series. I liked the hangman in that one. He liked animals, like me, and made me laugh.

Next up were the creature books. My sister said I could say “*animalis*” and that it would sound like a big word. She was in college and knew what she was talking about so I would use it whenever I remembered. More than once my dad had found me cross-legged on the floor with a pile of creature books like a fort all around me because I had lost track of the time. When it happened, there was always the strangest expression on his face. Something of a mix of sternness and... admiration? Maybe that was too strong of a word, but there was definitely something else there. Last week I’d checked out every book on octopuses there was. I’d learned a lot, like how they can change color and texture, and how the mom died blowing air on the babies to give them oxygen. When I’d read that I had asked my mom why, and we’d talked about it for a while. I liked asking her questions and that she would answer seriously.

I glanced at the teen books for my sister’s sake and rolled my eyes. The covers were all so gooey looking. Why did all the girls have that same expression and why were all the guys so muscled? I’d *seen* her boyfriends and they looked nothing like that. Give me a space adventure with zapping aliens instead. Which reminded me—my mom was making monster tacos for dinner and I wanted to help put the green eyes on so I had to bike home pretty fast.

I skimmed the rest of the sections quickly. The best drawing books were all gone and I couldn’t find any books on how to make fake boogers. I *knew* I’d seen it at least once before but I was afraid to ask where. I looked for a few books I wanted to read. There was one about a kid who can climb walls really well and gets caught. But then he gets to be the king’s spy instead and goes on all kinds of adventures. The other two had fun covers I’d never seen before, so I scooped them up as well.

I never really visited the adult side. Everything in it was pretty boring, but I had to make the full circle of the library. It wouldn’t feel complete otherwise. As I passed by the big windows I stopped. Something on the display caught my eye. There was a girl smiling in a coral pink sweater. I recognized her. My sister had heard her speak at her college and said her story was powerful and that she was very courageous. I snatched that one up as well and headed for the front desk.

She was still there. Worse, there were three cat pictures on her monitor and she was smiling, which meant she would be three times angrier if I interrupted her to ask to check me out. My shoes swiveled on their heels, looking for help. Gladys was sitting at the librarian desk, where you asked homework questions and for the best books to read. She was always nice and smiled at everyone. Her eyes locked onto mine and her mouth spread into a welcoming grin. I was saved. My feet slapped against the worn carpet as I hurried up to her with my pile of books.

“Hello, Christian. How are you today?” she asked.

“Good. Can you help me check out? I don’t want to bother the pink-haired lady and I want to hurry home to help with dinner.”

“You’re always such a good boy. Of course I’ll help you check out.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it. She’s kind of scary.”

“Who? Kristen? She can be an acquired taste, but she is very nice once you get to know her.”

I nodded absently, but wasn’t convinced. I began to imagine those monster tacos and how they would crunch and shatter in my mouth.

“Oooh, this is a good one,” she murmured, holding up the story of the king’s spy “you’re really going to like that. And this one looks fascinating,” she said about the book I picked out on platypuses. But then she stopped. She looked at a book in my pile and stared at it a long time without speaking.

“I’m afraid I can’t check this one out.”

It jolted me out of my now movie-sized taco-Godzilla fantasies.

“Which one? Why?” I asked. I peered over, trying to see my pile. It was *My Story*, by Elizabeth Smart, the one who spoke to my sister’s class.

Gladys readjusted in her chair

“How old are you, Christian?”

“Eleven. Why?”

Gladys pursed her lips and looked concerned for me.

“This is a very serious and heavy book. There are some things in there that I am not sure you are ready for.”

“She was taken, right? Out of her bedroom and up into the woods. My sister told me all about it. She’s in college. She said she was very brave.”

“That she is. She also wasn’t much older than you. I have read this book, and I do not think it is something you should read yet. I’m sorry. You can’t have this one today, but I will check out all the others for you,” she said with a gentle smile.

I didn’t know what I was feeling just then. It felt like I’d been punched in the stomach and left in the dark, but she was being so nice about it, so I felt confused and betrayed on top of it all. Nothing like this had happened before. I’d never been told I could not check out a book. The cover

gleamed beneath its plastic covering of the smiling girl. It beckoned me with what secrets it held, the questions now left unanswered. It made me want it more. But I didn't know what to say.

So I walked out.

I picked up my books and put them in my backpack and silently left. Words and thoughts tumbled inside me all the way home, jolted by each bike pedal I pressed down. The ride had never seemed so short. Once inside I dropped my pack against the couch with a thump.

My dad glanced from my face to my books and back to me again.

“What's up, champ? Why so glum?”

I shrugged. Slumping into the couch had never felt quite so good. I folded my arms, still thinking on strange unanswerable questions. From the chair, I could still feel my dad's eyes on me, then he turned back to reading. I stared at the wall, mulling.

“Dad? Are there bad books that aren't good to read?” I asked at last.

My dad set down his own book on his lap, his thumb keeping his place.

“That is an interesting question, Christian. I suppose the answer is ‘yes,’ but each person has to decide that for themselves, based on their own moral system.”

“What if someone else decides for you?”

“What do you mean? Your mom and I pick books we believe you are ready for. Some that even challenge your beliefs because we want you to think critically from many points of view. But we also know you, and are charged with raising you to be a good person, and so we follow that as best as we believe and know how. Is that what you mean?” He seemed concerned.

I furrowed my brow. Was he blaming himself?

“No, that's not it. Gladys wouldn't let me check out *My Story* by Elizabeth Smart because she said it was too scary, even though Alexandra told me all about it when she came home last weekend. I know she was only fourteen when she was kidnapped. I wanted to hear her story of how she was brave. But... she took it out of my pile,” I finished lamely. I didn't know how to end. It felt like an invasion. It felt like stealing, somehow.

My dad sat up straighter.

“Let me get this straight. Gladys, she's one of the librarians, right? She took a book you wanted to read and confiscated it?”

“Yeah, that's basically it. She let me keep the others, though.”

“Get in the car,” he said, grabbing his coat.

It was less than an hour before close when we arrived. The shadows on the trees in the parking lot were long and stretched thin. Hardly anyone was left in the library. I had to jog to keep up as he moved through the doors. Gladys looked up from her computer monitor and smiled as we approached.

“Is it true you prevented my son from checking out a library book today?” he asked calmly, but there were words brimming beneath the surface, held carefully in check. I took half a step back to avoid either adult’s notice.

“That is an adult nonfiction book with adult content, inappropriate for his reading level,” she said with equal calmness. Her fingers linked together and she leaned forward—interested, guarded, but still friendly.

“As his parent that is for me to decide.”

“Mr. Gallagher, you do have a point. However, I have personally read the book in question and while beautiful and heart wrenching for adults, it is not appropriate for children.” She lowered her voice. “There are frequent and explicit mentions of drugs and pornography in there. Do you want that in his impressionable mind?”

My dad closed his eyes and breathed long, deep, and heavy—three times.

“Gladys, I appreciate what you do for my son. He speaks very highly of you. You have to understand. I want a son who is compassionate. I’ve taught him to ask questions and to come to us if he finds anything that makes him uncomfortable. That girl, Elizabeth Smart is a hero I find him worthy of emulating. How am I supposed to prepare him to understand the world if he is not allowed to be exposed to these things that make him ask questions?”

She watched my dad, thoughts surging and receding behind her eyes. Her mouth parted—once, twice.

“You don’t know what kind of content is in that book,” she said quietly.

“Then I will find out with him.”

“A book like that can have a dangerous influence in the wrong hands. It can be misinterpreted. What if he gets curious about the wrong things in there?” It seemed like she was genuinely asking for an answer.

“He needs to know these things, especially if he has an interest in them. Stories are a way to explore complex subjects safely. You said this book might be dangerous. *All* books are dangerous, because they contain ideas. That is why they have power, and why they are important.”

She lowered her head for a five or six seconds, but it felt like much longer. Then she leaned down behind her desk and pulled out the familiar cover with the girl in the sweater, smiling.

“I’m sorry, Christian. I shouldn’t have done that to you. You have a wonderful father. Will you forgive me?”

I took the book from her hand. It felt warm and safe and powerful. I also remembered her smile and how often she gave it.

“I do. Can you help me to find an adventure book next week? Or…” I said hesitantly, but grew bolder. “Can you help me find a book on how to make fake boogers?” I asked with excitement.

Gladys laughed. It was unexpected, surprising even her, which made the sound all the brighter and more wonderful.

“I will find you the *best* book on how to make fake boogers ever,” she promised. My dad nodded, and thanked her, and it felt real.

As we left the library, I rubbed my thumb over the book, far more important because it had been taken away. The shadows had lengthened until they almost bled together now. Street lamps lit up triangle patches of sky down to the ground.

I was quiet. I didn’t know what to say to my dad because there were too many words. He looked so ordinary; blonde hair with a growing bald patch at the back, a white shirt with baby blue stripes, and a breast pocket where he kept pencils and a lucky penny. His jeans were worn and from a thrift store. But I guess that meant that heroes came in ordinary forms too.