

Cupid's Quill and the Old Fashioned Girl

Cupid's Quill has a star rating that constantly seems to be fluctuating between 2.5 and 2.7. On a good day it will remain 2.6 for a whole afternoon. The number of reviews is nestled steadily in the couple-hundreds. Eve is surprised they get that many customers with so few stars—then again, as she reminds herself, it's a rare book dealer in Louisiana, a kind of place you would only find if you happened to be in the area and the old-fashioned architecture and signage had caught your eye. It wasn't the type of place you would find online, or think to review, unless you had at least a foot in the door of the Southern American book lovers' scene.

Eve does. In fact, she's quite deep into the community. She prides herself on the fact that her work—book, comic and magazine repurposing—takes her all over the South in search of the most unique pieces of literature and journalism.

Today she finds herself driving towards a small town in the musty suburbs of Louisiana, finally giving in to her curiosity surrounding the strange little shop known as the Cupid's Quill—or as the collectors' circles liked to refer to it, 'the hoarder's house'. Eve was never sure why they called it that, but she is keen to find out for herself.

Eve parks her car in the street and finds herself soon standing under a silky beige awning that only does an okay job at blocking out the sun. She steps through the threshold, a glass door,

covered in old novelty posters and fliers, ranging from war propaganda from the 40s to advertisements for women's razors. The small, subtle chime of a bell echoes through the interior.

Immediately Eve is struck with a dusty smell that reminds her of her mammy's unused studio from way back when. The sound of soft 50s music fills her ears. The bookstore is cozy, with old-fashioned shelving and random paper decorations hanging from the ceiling. There is lots of color and no space has gone to waste.

Eve breathes in the familiar scent of old books. She looks around. No one else seems to be shopping, which is to be expected on a Monday morning. Eve does notice a plump young woman in the corner, holding an armful of old ratty books in her arms. An employee, she assumes. She appears to be looking for a place for one of them on a shelf, and she's humming '*Cry Me A River*' to herself. She doesn't notice Eve, not at first.

Eve brings herself forward, down the entrance step and into the store. The creaking of the orange wood floor catches the woman's attention. She Looks up, peers beyond the bookshelf she's working on. She shelves the book she's currently holding and walks over to Eve, clutching her remaining books. She's dressed in a comfortable-looking cardigan and flowy long skirt, finished off with victorian-style heels. She smells like a school library.

Her soft lips part as she starts to speak. "Why hello. I'm the owner, you can call me Sybil. Is there anything I can help you find today?"

"Nothing in particular. Just here for a book," Eve responds. Sybil chuckles.

“Well you’ve certainly come to the right place. Let me know if y’ need anything.” With that she wanders away. Eve is fascinated with her. What intrigues her more is the fact that she’s yet to fathom the low star rating. What she does understand, though, is the ‘hoarder’s house’ comments. The place is absolutely brimming with stuff. Every crevice and shelf, every table and bit of furniture seems to share one single function; hold books. Some shelves contain old pamphlets, and there’s a small rack of vintage comics, but the old books are the belle of the ball. Eve can tell from one look at the place that Sybil enjoys her job.

Eve wanders to the back of the store. After some looking she pulls out a small canvas hardcover, *An Old Fashioned Girl* is embossed on the top. She mutters to herself; "Perfect," running her fingers over the toothy fabric. It looks old, at least 50 years, with yellowed pages. It's easily the thinnest book in its section.

Eve wanders around some more. She finds her way to Sybil, who has since set her stack of books down. She’s in a haze, dusting off shelves. Eve tries to pretend she hadn’t seen her glancing over possessively every time Eve had touched a book. She clears her throat. Sybil looks over.

“How much for this?”

“Oh!” Sybil takes the book excitedly and examines it. “Yes, yes, *An Old Fashioned Girl*. Interesting read. It was published in the 1870s, I believe.”

“Neat.” A long pause while Sybil gets distracted reading the publication info. Eve taps her foot. “So.. how much?” She prompts.

“Right. Prices. \$30. I should’a marked it, my bad.” She almost hands the book back to Eve, then stops herself, clutching the spine.

“If I may ask.. what’s brought you to a vintage book shop? Are you a collector? A scholar?”

“No. An artist, actually,” Eve states. Sybil is clearly trying to maintain her customer service smile, despite the twitch in her eye.

“Oh?”

“I paint on the covers, and fill the pages with little doodles and whatnot. They sell pretty well online.”

“My, the lord is testing me,” Sybil sighs quietly.

“Sorry?”

“Just talking to myself. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather go to a garage sale or.. or thrift store? The books I collect tend to be worth a bit more. I don’t sell to just *anyone*.” Eve is struck by this comment. Now the rating is making more sense. Eve wonders how many other people Sybil has gatekept her books from. Was this normal? Or did she just really have a thing against artists?

“I normally get materials at those places, yeah. I’ve been wanting to check this store out, though. You have a much better selection of canvases,” Eve explains calmly.

“Canvases! Oh bless your heart, you’re in the wrong place.”

“Yes, you seem very sure of that.” A pause. Sybil is still clutching the book like its a newborn child. “So.. Can I have it, or..?”

After a few seconds Sybil forces herself to hand the book over. Her grip is strong, and it takes some prying to fully take it from her.

“I’ll ring you up at the register,” Sybil forces herself to say.

Sybil leads Eve hastily over to the counter and flips through a book of barcodes, a scanner in her other hand. She scans one with a pained look and takes a deep breath.

“Are you *absolutely sure* you want to buy one of *my* books for your...*crafts*?” Eve takes a deep breath.

“Yes.”

“Do y’ have something against vintage book dealers? It sure seems that way.” Eve throws her head into her elbow-perched hands.

“Good grief. Is this how you treat every customer? Is *this* why your hours are so random?”

“I just don’t see the appeal in ruining a perfectly good book!” Eve scoffs.

“*Ruining*? I repurpose. And if that’s how you feel I think I’d like to get a few more books.”

Sybil twitches.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Watch me.” Eve walks over to the nearest shelf and grabs five random books.

“Excuse you, those are the expensive ones!” Eve ignores her and adds two more to her stack. To herself, Sybil mutters; “*Follow your dreams, open that book shop!*’ they said. *It’ll be fun!*’ they said.”

Eve drops her stack at the register. Sybil glances at the pile, defeated. Tired.

“Will that be all? Or do y’ want my house too? Maybe my car?” Eve shakes her head. She isn’t generally the petty type but today she’s fueled with a potent passive-aggression towards Sybil. “Great.”

Sybil rings up each book.

“\$347.63. Cash only.”

“Yeesh. You weren’t kidding about those prices.” Eve counts out and hands over a stack of cash, roughly \$350. “Keep the change,” she says. She picks up her stack of books and breathes in with satisfaction.

“I’ve already got a painting in mind for ‘Old Fashioned Girl,’” Eve states proudly.

Sybil responds in a tired voice; “Good for you.”

“2.6. Yeah, that’s about right,” Eve says to herself. Sybil averts her eyes. Eve nods an acknowledging goodbye and retraces her steps back to the front of the dingy little store. She must admit, she is going to miss the atmosphere here.

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Eve has been hard at work designing and decorating the books from Cupid's Quill. She leaves 'an Old Fashioned Girl' for last, as she typically does with the projects she feels most excited about. Her studio apartment smells of linseed oil and bleach by the time she finishes. She leaves the fan running as she locks up. She hoists the neatly-packed books further under her arm and closes the door behind her.

Eve tries to remind herself that her little spat with the bookstore owner was at least a week ago. It has yet to fully leave her mind, unfortunately. She recalls the pit in her stomach growing as her craft was demeaned. She almost feels it again now as she tries to put it out of her mind. Eve tells herself the entire car ride that she's over the fiasco. She repeats it every-so-often and eventually tires herself out to the point that she doesn't care anymore. She has several hours to do so. Personal deliveries could take days on the road, so Eve was glad this current trip was only taking her a couple hours away, through the picturesque wetlands of Louisiana.

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A familiar quiet chime rings through Eve's ears as she peers into the store. Sybil is catching up on her reading behind the counter. She doesn't bother to look up.

"We don't open until 12:43," she says tiredly. She waits. Eve wonders if Sybil has any staff besides herself. She shakes the thought away when Sybil finally looks up. "Oh. You," she says. Eve makes her way down the step and around the book-themed knick-knack display.

“You ordered your books back. Well-played,” she concedes. She has to admit, she was surprised to see the order come through only an hour after she’d first left the store. The message had admittedly made her chuckle ‘check mate, book thief.’ Eve appreciated the literary reference. She’d, in fact, painted and sold several copies of the Book Thief.

There is a moment of silence. Sybil sighs.

“I hope you can understand where I was coming from,” she says.

“I honestly can’t say I do,” Eve admits.

“I opened this place to find good homes for these books. Places where they’ll be read and cherished. I just.. it’s out of love, not spite. I hope you know that.”

Eve inhales. She nods slowly. She doesn’t fully get it, but she’s starting to see why Sybil is the way she is.

Eve brings the package over to the counter and drops it in front of Sybil. She had tied a long thread of twine around like a christmas present ribbon, which Sybil is now undoing.

“I’ll admit, I was feelin’ a little petty when I did that—bought the books back, that is,” Sybil says.

“It’s alright, I thought it was kind of funny,” Eve says.

“I was a bit much, wasn’t I.”

“Saltier than a bag of boiled peanuts.” Sybil breathes out a laugh.

“Sure. I deserve that.”

“Well, I’m sorry I pushed it. I’d call it even.”

Eve waits patiently, rolling on the balls of her feet while Sybil unwraps the topmost parcel, the thinnest. She hums to herself while delicately peeling the paper at the taped ends. The wrapping drops to the floor, she examines it and her face brightens. Eve catches a glimpse of the work she'd done. The front, back and spine have an oil-painted spread of a small city with a few people passing through the streets. The composition stars a woman on the cover, gracefully moving towards the viewer, layered in a 1900s style-outfit. The title, *An Old Fashioned Girl*, is lined with intricate swirls and patterns in a gold ink.

“Well I’ll be,” Sybil whispers. “I was.. Wrong. This is amazing.” She lowers the book and looks up at Eve. Eve is almost struck by how casually she locks her into a puppy-dog stare. “The detail, the historical accuracy... by god you didn’t ruin it, you made it better.”

“Ahem. Thanks,” Eve sputters. “It’s why I do it. There’s a beauty in taking something old and bringing new life to it.”

“Well it’s lovely. You’re welcome back any time... If you’re not too scarred by my behavior last week.”

“I’m not.” Eve pauses, contemplates her next move. “Can I buy you a drink?”

“I... sure. Maybe you can show me other ways to repurpose these. Some have been sitting for a decade.” Eve smiles.

“Yeah. That sounds great,” she says.

Eve leaves Cupid’s Quill a five star review on their walk to the nearest pub. In the comments she notes that Sybil really cared for her books. ‘She’s just... a little old fashioned.’

