

The Last Chance Used Bookstore

The Last Chance wasn't just the last used bookstore in the Midwest, or even America. No, The Last Chance was the last used bookstore on earth. In actuality, it was the last bookstore left, used or otherwise, since the death of print. Words on pages embraced by colorful covers had gradually, then overnight, disappeared—not by edict or design, but by simple neglect. Few citizens now under the age of 50 could either read or write Old English, since wireheads had formally adopted Twitspeak as their main mode of communication.

Outside, it might be 2040, but within this brick and mortar façade, with its faded and peeling wallpaper, it was 1940 in Green Town, Illinois, or Victorian London where Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper prowled the fog-shrouded, cobblestone alleyways, or even, maybe, the ancient battlefield of Troy.

The proprietor of this last vestige of literary imagination was Harley Jenkins, who had, at the turn of the century, been a popular genre author who was fortunate enough to have three of his thrillers turned into internet hologram programs, as well as his comic Jewish crime-fighting duo of Bateman and Rubin, which to this day provided him enough in royalties to maintain this outpost, and even to undergo Re-Juve every ten years so he still looked like a vigorous 50 when he was approaching 90.

The Last Chance had its birth in a small outlet in a dying neighborhood mall. It was successful enough that ten years later Harley leased the empty store next door and knocked out the wall, doubling the available space for his precious volumes. Another decade after that he

purchased one of the many abandoned churches, and now had enough room to add books in perpetuity.

But Harley didn't sell his books. For the donation of one book, whatever the subject, whatever the condition, a customer could sit in one of the twenty-odd leather recliners with its individual hurricane lamp from sunup to sundown for one day. And the illumination wasn't the mandated and obnoxious blue or white LED lighting that blinded oncoming cars, but the warm and comfortable incandescent amber bulbs, which Harley constantly replenished from his stash in a warehouse of lights closed at the turn of the century after the Great Energy Efficient Purge (GEEP) in 2018.

Most books had long since disintegrated or been burned in the Freedom From Thought Movement of 2020. It was Harley's dream to acquire a copy of every book still in existence to fill this modern Library of Alexandria. He had a good representative sample of most of the revealed knowledge that now meant so little to so few people. Except to Old Man Burns.

Burns was literally ancient, a little stooped man with barely a fringe of white hair, who obviously had never gotten a Re-Juve, who probably didn't even know what one was. But Old Man Burns had visited Harley almost every day since the shop opened in this neighborhood, clutching a book under his jacket and then flourishing it, as if a magician's trick. He had given Harley over 3500 texts, including some remarkable and rare novels: Heart of Gold, Head of Wood; La Casa de Los Tres Bobos; A Yardstick for Lunatics; Why a Duck?; Flying Without Annette; and the classic Christmas delight Parsley Sage, Rosemary and Tim.

Yet, with all these goodies, Old Man Burns had hinted at a secret copy of The Greatest Novel Ever Written, and might someday give it up.

But that fall, when the leaves turned brown and crisp, Old Man Burns was missing, seemingly dropping from the face of the earth. A few weeks later Harley found out that Old Man Burns had indeed dropped off the face of the earth. He had died.

One cold morning, a younger, yet still as recognizably follicly-challenged, version of Old Man Burns—Old Man Burns Jr.—opened his door, apparently disconcerted either by the bell or by the musty ambience of this mausoleum.

“Are you Harley?” he asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“David’s son?”

“Did you know my father?”

“No, but my dad knew him almost his entire life.”

He informed Harley that his father had left a package addressed to him and he was carrying out his final wish. He left the package on the counter and headed for the exit, but Harley stopped him.

“What was your father’s first name? I never knew.”

“Robert,” the son said. “But everybody called him Bobbie.”

And he left, the bell on top of the door tinkling a final farewell.

“Bobbie Burns,” smiled Harley. “Appropriate.”

Harley stared at the butcher paper package tied with twine. He set it aside and walked a few paces away, reluctant to discover what Old Man Burns had proclaimed The Greatest Novel Ever Written. He wanted to savor the moment of anticipation, but his desire finally overcame him.

Cutting the string with a pocket knife, Harley reverently unwrapped the package. He stood in shock, for here was THE book he had last read nearly seventy years ago. THE book his mother had tossed, along with a million dollars in baseball cards, when Harley failed to clean his room when he went into the Army. It was THE book he had long coveted, but no one had ever carried through his door before. THE book that had inspired him to become a writer and a better father (although he failed at that last task).

It was the story about a widower trying to raise two precocious children in the racist south in the 1930s. It was indeed The Greatest Novel Ever Written.

And as he squeezed the book tightly to his heart, a tear welled in his eye, for he would now finally be able to revisit the role model he had so wanted to become, but didn't.

Harley sat in one of his recliners, turned on the lamp, and drifted back to a gentler and simpler time in his mind. Now, there was nothing but time.