

The Predator

The protagonist of my novel was an academic librarian who had fought his way out of Ozarks poverty to earn his Master's and a more prestigious position than the one I actually occupied. A reticent fellow, always highly critical of himself, he had begun to think his struggles meaningless and that he should have remained in the hills. He hated being a librarian.

I visualized that drafty old farmhouse where my widower father still lived. God! I could go there to finish my novel, all right, but what would I do for money? We've all heard it: don't quit your day job.

My novel was autobiographical, but that was the art of it. Using myself to further the argument was a narrative device.

Particularly since I had no idea how to construct a plot. What, should my hero be drawn into murder? Falsely accused? Or guilty, maybe! Not my game, murder mysteries, and yet my hero had to do *something*. Win the lottery. Fall in love? The phone rang.

"Could you come up, Tom? I need you this afternoon."

Nearly a semester had passed but our fearsome new dean, Barbara Clarke, and I had seldom spoken, thus her calling me "Tom" seemed ominous. Already Dean Clarke had enticed or cajoled three of our doddering staff into early retirement. My own job, Humanities Librarian, had seemed secure, because I was only thirty-one and had just published an article. That was the dean's mission, other than lopping off heads: She wanted us to publish. Maybe—probably—Dean Clarke wanted to talk about my article.

Nary a studious soul on the first floor except for Cynthia Moore, reference librarian, peering down through her bifocals at *Booklist*. Wait. Cynthia lifted her nose to stare resignedly at two young men, clowning it up by that damned Coke machine. Then she saw me, shook her head,

and smiled conspiratorily. Reference was a ghost town but Cynthia was my age and probably would be spared the dean's axe.

I paused on the landing to observe the two young men. One wadded up his cup and made a basket in a barrel from twenty feet. My article had studied the distribution of empty plastic cups when the library, after intense debate, finally gave in and installed vending machines. Some students carried the cups into the stacks as had been feared, but I found no damage to the books. This might have been because students seldom used the books.

Why had we settled for plastic? If we couldn't rid ourselves of single-use cups, then we ought at least to have insisted on paper. Another article began shaping itself as I reached the second floor. This time, I'd survey hundreds of libraries. "Why did we accept plastic in the first place?" I cried out, startling an Asian man, who looked up anxiously from his laptop, as if I were about to confiscate his green card.

When I reached the third floor, I instinctively glanced left and right, catching the ends of shelves. Some librarians develop a sixth sense about shelf order, and this was my area, after all. Without conscious effort, I spied a mistake in Shakespeare. From fifty feet away, I couldn't read the Cutter number, but I knew these acres of books like a cook knows what's in the pantry. Short books, books with blue bindings, slender books, oversized books, books so old and tattered they should be boxed and moved into climate control. Without breaking a stride, I reached up to a top shelf to move *Love's Labour's Lost* to the left of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and that's when I became a sexual predator.

Because at that instant, a young woman reached high from her traveling stool to shelve an old Folger's *Macbeth*. She wasn't much more than five feet tall and it was all she could do to reach the top. My sudden intrusion upset her balance—and also, allow me to point out, saved her

from hurting herself. As she fell into my arms, I slipped a hand under one of her thighs and dropped to my knees. She looked up at me, her savior, with her pretty brown eyes, and I kissed her.

Her name was Hope, it turned out. Probably Hope was attractive, but I stared at her nose-ring and thought of a cantankerous boar my dad could never keep in a pen. That old boar would stick his snout against the electric fence until his bristles fried—and pop the wire. I had *that* uncouth thought, but also, momentarily, I was Romeo. Hope, if she had a part, was surely Juliet.

Was this the plotline I so desperately needed? Unlikely lovers, colliding in the stacks?

Hope lay there hardly a second. She flashed those brown eyes. Then she wriggled like a cat that doesn't want to be held, regained her feet, and fell again. I teetered over into the broad aisle, trying to suppress my laughter.

Hope did *not* laugh. She looked up at me with a mixture of revulsion and, no doubt about it, fear. Fear?

She leapt up and ran into American Literature, and I didn't like the image of myself running after her, cornering her, trying to explain my behavior somewhere between Hamlin Garland and Ernest Hemingway. Tomorrow, I'd give it a try. Stupid mistake, and I apologize. Silly, spur of the moment, romantic thing. Oh yes: sorry I laughed.

"Millie's in a coma now," Dean Clarke said.

I nodded. The famous Millie Pace was my furtive, demented officemate. Today was December 8th, and I hadn't seen her since early November.

A week before Thanksgiving, in frigid weather, Security reported movement—maybe a homeless person, even a dog—in the library after hours. Through several nights, they couldn't

quite track that presence down, though they heard shuffling, doors closing and opening off the stairwells, and once, wild, fire-filled eyes shining up into their flashlight beams.

Of course, it was Millie. The men chased the ghostly, whispering sound of her down into the basement and across to the Annex where the old Dewey decimal books gathered silverfish. Millie huddled in a corner like some ragamuffin out of Dickens. The men guided her across campus to their office, treating her with genial contempt. Shortly, Millie would begin her year-long journey through hospitals and mental wards, then on to the cemetery.

“So terribly sad,” the dean said, even though Millie’s demise helped her solve a budgeting problem, and possibly spared one more librarian for one more semester. For an instant, I studied Barbara Clarke. In her mid-forties, she had a young face that made her seem quite attractive when she smiled—but she seldom smiled. She had a nice body, and briefly, before the faculty understood her mission, I fantasized about having sex with her.

Dean Clarke was alone in the world, as faculty gossip had it, and coming in with the mission to cut staff wouldn’t make her any friends. Her only hope was to gain the Chancellor’s recommendation and move on to a better job elsewhere. Barbara would become the bad guy in my novel, but not as in a superhero movie. She, too, was doomed, and my task as a novelist was to portray her gentler, more vulnerable side.

Maybe she owned a dog.

I realized Barbara was staring at me, but I couldn’t think what to say. “We all . . . reach the end,” I managed, a pseudo-profound remark as much about Barbara as poor old Millie. A phony remark, because I didn’t like either woman.

Barbara rearranged her face and stiffened her back into an almost soldierly posture. “I talked to Finance, Tom. This business with the hospital, setting up nursing care—”

“Relatives?”

“None so far. Perhaps a brother in Florida. In any case, there’s some money from direct deposit, but they don’t think it’s enough for all the years she worked. They have no record of her cashing checks—”

“Paper checks?”

“Yes. Going back ten years or more. If you could go over there for me, Tom. Maybe there’s a documents box, a desk drawer—”

“I’ll get right on it, Barbara.” I’d called her Barbara for the first time ever, and surely that was progress. Exuding public relations, she came around the desk and we shook hands. Trying not to seem needy, I said, “Have a chance to look at my article?”

“Top of my list, Tom.” Barbara reached across her desk and plucked up *The Modern Librarian*. “Congratulations.”

Three times Millie had been anointed Librarian of the Year. The Great Public holds certain notions about librarians, mostly positive, partly bemused, but truly it pays little attention and knows little. Hoping someone will notice, librarians give themselves awards.

Every year the school paper ran a story, nearly the same story, about how Millie had grown up on an Ozarks hillfarm with eight barefooted siblings. She walked six miles to the one-room school, where she read all the books in the library, including *The Aeneid* in Latin. With hard work and grit, she took her B.A. in library studies, and then a job at our library, asking time off only to earn her Master’s three years later.

Millie knew all there was to know about style sheets and could spot a plagiarized paper from across the room. For years she taught LIS 101, the required one-hour course on the Library

of Congress classification system, filing rules, and proper citations that constituted our only claim to pedagogy.

This fall, with Millie rapidly failing, 101 had devolved to me.

As the paper had it, Millie was a “kind soul” always ready to help a student find just the right source. She had “a mischievous twinkle” in her eyes, but she was also a perfectionist with no patience for the misplaced bracket or semi-colon. Millie gave over an entire lecture to the virtues of sewn signatures and letterpress type vis-à-vis the barbarism of perfect binding and offset printing. Students, born as books were dying, tried not to look baffled, but she might as well have lectured in Hindi.

Millie once berated me when, researching a reference question, I left half a dozen tomes lying face down on my desk. Such careless practice destroyed bindings, she said.

Faculty assumed Millie would grow wiser with age. They *wanted* her to be wise. They chuckled at her habit of placing a peach in the staff refrigerator on Mondays, and gnawing on it through Fridays; or gathering up the crumbs of cookies and coffee cakes, saving them for lunch; or pouring day’s end coffee into a thermos and taking it home. “Millie grew up poor,” people said.

The rest of us didn’t? You probably don’t end up a librarian if you came from money.

I watched the mound of trash grow on her desk—worn-out books in there, “wounded books,” she called them, books that “needed a friend.” But also sack after white paper sack with half-eaten sandwiches and Butterfinger wrappers and half-pint milk cartons. Against the far wall, her hoard ascended at a perfect 45-degree angle. I complained to Dean Clarke’s predecessor, old Robert Poole in his tweed coat, a little vacant-eyed in his dotage because his Meerschaum pipe had been outlawed. “Oh, dear,” Bob said. “Don’t you think Millie will retire soon?”

Now, with Bob himself a-moldering in the grave, it was over. Millie might once have been famous, but Librarian of the Year was decades behind her, and no one had visited her in years. She'd owned a two-story brick house, built around 1920, quite fine in its day. But in her front yard weeds poked up through the snow, and her porch brimmed with junk: broken furniture from dumpsters, bags of aluminum cans, piles of frozen clothing. Dean Clarke had given me a key but the front door stood ajar. Snow had drifted in for six feet or so in a long, graceful swale.

Oak floors, but the varnish had peeled away from the assault of water, dripping through the ceiling from the ceiling above it from a gash in the roof. That's when you know it's too late, my dad used to say. You can neglect paint, never caulk the windows, let the front door fall off its hinges, but when rain and snow finally harass their way through the roof your house is a goner.

That lovely oak floor had a crust on it, of plastic sacks, cardboard that mice had chewed up, and maybe food, so that my shoes crunched crossing the room. I inspected a book cart, the antique, hard maple kind. I could picture Millie Pace pushing it across campus after midnight, carrying pure contraband: the fine, broken editions she meant to fix. Those old, brown books had swollen into something akin to decayed flesh, and crusted over with a blue-green algae that sparkled with frost.

There was a mildewed couch but otherwise no furniture. Empty cardboard boxes rose to the ceiling in a back room. Water hadn't reached the kitchen and it remained relatively clean, but the refrigerator bulged with styrofoam containers of spoiled food. I tried the range with a wooden match but the burners wouldn't light. No gas, no electricity, and that had been the state of things for a long time.

No one checked on Millie. We all were complicit in ignoring her, and I, professing not to care, gave off a shudder. There but for the grace of God, indeed.

I climbed two steps of the stairway, then jumped up and down, testing if it would sustain my weight. Each riser glistened with mold, and my shoes slipped before gaining purchase.

If possible, upstairs was in even worse shape, but I found a bedroom where Millie had slept before the cold drove her into the library's stairwells. By the door: a bucket she'd used for a toilet. But in the corner, perfectly dry, stood a walnut chifforobe where a few of Millie's dresses—all of them old, all faded into the same drabness—hung. The chifforobe was a beautiful piece, an heirloom, maybe the most valuable thing her family had owned and all that remained of the Millie Pace estate. It would be quite the chore to get it down those springy steps.

In one drawer I found the metal box Dean Barbara Clarke hoped for.

The box held Millie's birth certificate, her degrees in their blue folders, a first university I.D, and even a letter, five years old, from a brother in Florida. The box also held her paychecks. I expected the dean's praise for diligent duty, and felt eager to help still more. I'd run down the brother. I'd carry out that chifforobe.

Barbara counted the checks, over thirty of them, but didn't speak. At last she looked up. She didn't smile, and her eyes were almost too complicated to describe. Pain, regret, reproach, doubt, and wariness. Mostly wariness, and I knew something was up. My eyes dropped to *The Modern Librarian*, and I waited.

"Tom, thank you," the dean said. "Such a difficult task. We all loved Millie. Millie was—"

"She certainly was," I said.

"I'm so pleased I could call on you. Tom—"

Now I suspected what was about to happen, and I wouldn't make it hard for her. "Go ahead, Dean Clarke."

Barbara brought her hands together with the fingerpoints touching, as if to say, *here's the church, here's the steeple*. "While you were gone, Tom, I had . . . let's call it an interview with Hope Landers."

"The page," I said.

"I very much need to hear . . . *your* side of things."

I pictured myself as the guy in the novel with his dead end job. I reached out to grab *The Modern Librarian*. What a stupid article, I thought, and I dropped the journal into a waste basket.

"Guilty as charged."

Barbara's eyes flared in indignation. "How do you know what Hope said?"

"Does it even matter? If you're accused of harassment, of—of assault—"

"Tom!"

"It was a freak thing, an accident. I caught her as she fell, and then it was like I was channeling some old movie—"

"No premeditation."

"I know I must have hired her, but pages come and go so fast. I don't remember her."

"Then why did you kiss her? Just male . . . presumption?"

Throughout history, how many kisses were carefully planned? "I imagined I was . . . Romeo."

Not a flicker of sympathy in Barbara's eyes. What if I bent over the desk and kissed *her*? Kiss every woman on campus, call it a scientific experiment—oh, what an article that would make! "Why does it matter, Barbara? You've got my head under your guillotine. Cut it off! You think I give a shit? What do you think it's like, working in this place, wondering if you're the next head to roll? I hate this place. I hate *you!*"

“Oh, Tom, *please*.” Some color left her face. She frowned. “Hope was pretty shook up, that’s all. She’s only nineteen.”

“I’d apologize if it would do any good.”

“The correct moment will come, I’m sure.” Barbara laced her fingers again and shook her head. “She cried and cried. It took me an hour to calm her, and I—believe me, Tom, I didn’t want to—I was forced to call Human Resources.”

Forced? I remembered those gentle folk, with their upbeat tones, their careful language and averted eyes. The hoops I’d jumped though, a white male, even to be hired. My voice climbed an octave; maybe I had a future as a hillbilly preacher. In my novel, shades of dark humor would emerge: “Woe betide us! The end is near!”

“Of course not, Tom. Don’t go off the deep end on me. This is academia, you know how things are. I’m sure there’ll be a committee, maybe you’ll need counseling, but . . . well, it’s not as though you’ve been *stalking* Hope.” Barbara paused. “Have you?”

I threw up my hands and walked out. On my way, I knocked over a chair and slammed the door. Probably unwise if I wanted to remain employed at the university.

I half-expected campus police to arrive and drag me off for a waterboarding session. It would make a great scene in my novel. Even unsympathetic readers would scream it out: no, no, this is going too far.

Twelve days remained in the semester. I gave a final in Millie’s course and spent five days reading *War and Peace*.

I began packing books and clothes into my car, and taking my broken-down furniture to the dumpster. By the time I turned in Millie’s grades, I had reduced my worldly goods to a TV,

my laptop, and two dinette chairs. I didn't expect company but kept that second chair to prop up my feet.

I avoided the lounge and the staff avoided me, except for Cynthia Moore, who poked her head into my office once or twice. "Not the same without Millie," she said, smiling that sad smile of hers.

I looked up from bagging the old woman's trash but couldn't hold Cynthia's eyes. I shouldn't have been surprised, but they were full of kindness. "We should have gone out," I said.

A spike of anger crept into her voice. "I *tried* to encourage you."

"Well, you know." I laughed. "Getting involved with somebody at work—"

"Yeah, yeah," she said. "Where else are people going to meet? And we don't work together anymore, right?"

Now we both laughed, but I turned toward Millie's garbage again. "I'll call you," I almost said, but I didn't want her to see my tears. I felt her melt away behind me.

At my apartment, someone had begun calling me. When I picked up the receiver, I heard silence, then a click, every hour or so.

I shut down the landline, another day passed, and those calls resumed on my cell. Once or twice I heard a sort of half-sob. "Hope?" I asked. "Hope, I'm *sorry*. You were, you were a—" I couldn't say, "You were a prop." Just a prop in a momentary fantasy. A minor character in my novel-in-the-sky.

Maybe it wasn't Hope. Maybe it was Cynthia.

I dropped off my resignation to Dean Clarke. I'd have been gratified had she said, "Tom, this is nonsense! Are you going to throw away a promising career over nothing at all?"

She said, “Sorry it had to come to this.” Maybe her face registered a faint regret, but because of me she’d pretty much met her dead wood quota. In her face, too, I read moral repugnance. Rationally, she might have acknowledged the thought to be ridiculous, but emotionally she saw me as a sex offender. No doubt, Human Resources had been busy. Oh, the e-mails, the calls, the strategizing in case I sought legal help.

Barbara sighed. “You may have some trouble, Tom.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“I can say you worked here. Give the dates. I don’t have to mention—”

“Thanks,” I said, trying not to sound ironic, but really it was as though I were someone else, the protagonist of my own boring, nutty life. I was as nutty, as boring, as mortal, as poor Millie Pace. As nutty and mortal as Dean Barbara Clarke and every form-loving, illiterate bureaucrat in Human Resources. We’d all end up squatting over a bucket.

One piece of luck: my resignation coincided with the end of my lease, and my refunded deposit made a good chunk of travel money. I finished packing the car, looked around once more to imprint where I’d lived, to see if there was even one thing I’d miss, and headed downstairs. Made no sense, but I felt a rush of freedom. Like I’d been let out of prison. I’d spend two weeks in a cheap hotel before crashing in on my poor old dad. I planned to finish the first draft of my novel.

I’d call it, *The Predator*.

Then the strangest thing of all: just as I reached for the ignition, Hope Landers appeared by the hood.

Those phone calls! She’d been stalking me!

Hope looked nice. The nose ring was gone. She was dressed up, not for a date but maybe for an interview.

What else could I do? I rolled down the window. “Hope,” I said. “That’s a fine name. I’m sorry, Hope, I—”

“Professor, you don’t have to leave. I don’t *want* you to.” She gave me a wide smile. No sadness in it, like Cynthia Moore’s. Nothing but youth and hope, and I thought, she’s the girl next door. My God.

“Hope, I—”

“We could talk. Right now!”

We could talk, and have dinner, and make love on the carpet of my apartment without furniture. Here’s the trouble with harassment. You, the predator, just might succeed, and she, the victim, might want you to.

“I apologize, Hope.” For good measure, not entirely sure if it was a compliment, I said, “You’re a very nice girl.”

Hope glanced over my pitiful worldly goods, packed to the ceiling in the back seat. “Woman,” she murmured.

I started the engine and backed a little way into the parking lot. Hope looked sad.

“What you *did* to me,” she called out, and I thought, great line, I’ll use it in the novel. I closed my eyes and saw country roads pushing out under the oaks, the hills galloping by. I dropped the shifter into drive.

Hope clasped her hands as if to pray. “It was very sweet.”