Goodbye to All That

"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 discuss my article.

Nary a studious soul on the first floor except for Cynthia Moore, the other reference librarian, peering down through her bifocals at *Booklist.* A shout rang out and Cynthia lifted her nose to stare at two young men, clowning it up by that damned Coke machine. She shook her long hair and cast me an intimate glance.

I liked Cynthia, and knew she wanted me to ask her out, but I held back because we worked together. You go out, things seem fine, then it all blows up because of a flash of anger, an impolitic remark. Then you still have to work with her. Or him.

And all was not well in the library. It was as though we awaited some event that would set the place afire. It didn't seem the right time to begin a relationship.

"What's Babs want?" Cynthia asked, and I shrugged. About half the staff referred to Barbara Clarke as Babs but so far I'd kept to "Dean."

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 discarded, single-use plastic cups when the library, after intense debate, finally relented 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 never touched the books.

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 wearily from his laptop. We were near the holidays, a lonely time for foreign students, particularly those from places expensive to fly to.

And for me, the country boy with school debt.

"Sorry," I said, and glanced far down the stairs at Cynthia, who waved at me. Wasn't life too short for middle-aged discretion? When I came downstairs again, I'd suggest dinner.

I reached the third floor and reflexively 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, I knelt in what they used to call a fair catch position, and

instinctively thrust my arms under her thighs. The girl looked up at me, her savior, with her pretty brown eyes, and I kissed her.

Oh, dear.

Her name was Hope, it turned out. Probably Hope was attractive, but this hardly occurred to me, because, for an instant, I was bold and dashing. I was Romeo. Hope, if she had a part, was surely Juliet.

She 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 chasing after her, cornering her, trying to explain my behavior somewhere between Hamlin Garland and Ernest Hemingway. Tomorrow, I'd give it a try. A mistake following an accident, 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 ancient, demented officemate. Today was December 1, 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. Security chased the ghostly, whispering sound of her down into the basement and across to the Annex where the old Dewey decimal books slowly turned to dust. Millie huddled in a corner like some ragamuffin out of Dickens. The men guided her across campus to their office, treating her with gentle contempt.

"So terribly sad," the dean said, even though Millie's demise helped her solve a budgeting problem, and possibly spared one more librarian from the axe. 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. Well, to be truthful, I'd never seen her smile.

Dean Clarke was alone in the world, as faculty gossip had it, and arriving with the all-but-open 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. Half my work day I spent writing my—autobiographical—novel, and likely Barbara would become my bad guy, but not as in a graphic novel. My task would be to portray her gentler, more vulnerable side.

Maybe she owned a dog.

Barbara stared 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.

Now, Tom, I lectured myself. *Be nice.*

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. Modeling good public relations, she came around the desk and we shook hands. I said, "Have a chance to look at my article?"

"Top of my list, Tom." Barbara reached across her desk and plucked up *The 21st Century Librarian.* "Congratulations."

Three times Millie had been anointed Librarian of the Year. The Great Public holds certain notions about librarians, mostly positive though also bemused, but truly it pays little attention and couldn't care less. Thus, 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 and pluck and resolve and stick-to-itiveness, she took her B.A. in library studies, 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, proper citations, and databases that constituted our only claim to pedagogy.

This fall, with Millie rapidly failing, 101 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 beginning their death throes, 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 nursing her can of Le Sueur peas through five helpings; 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.

What about the rest of us? Me, for instance, growing up on a rocky farm that hardly supported goats?

No, sir. You didn't end up a librarian if you came from money.

I watched the mound of trash grow on Millie's desk—worn-out books in there, "wounded books," she called them, books that "needed a friend." But also sack after white paper sack with sandwich morsels 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. “Goodness,” 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 spilled over with junk: broken furniture from dumpsters, bags of aluminum cans, piles of frozen clothing. Dean Clarke gave 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 water finally harasses its 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 bloated flesh, and crusted over with a blue-green algae sparkling 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 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, except for cash, all that remained of the Millie Pace estate. It would be quite a 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 21st Century Librarian*, in exactly the position I'd left it.

"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—"

I could see that something was wrong and 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."

I had to think. "The page?"

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

I reached out to grab *The 21st Century Librarian.* What a stupid article, I thought, and 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?"

I laughed. "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! "You've got my head under your guillotine, *Babs.* Right where you want it! What do you think it's like, working in this doomed library, wondering if you're the next head to roll?"

Her head jerked backward as if I'd struck her. Some color left her face. "Oh, Tom, *please.* Hope was shook up, that's all. She's only 19."

"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—she didn't *want* me to, if you can believe that. And of course *I* didn't want to. But with an interview like that, and the paperwork already begun, 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 through even to be hired. My voice climbed an octave; maybe I had a future as a hillbilly preacher. "Woe betide us! The end is near!"

"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. I tore into reading *War and Peace.*

I thought about the farm down in the hills, and Dad's woodworking business. Christmas break was coming up and we'd already planned to rip twenty cedar and hickory logs into long boards. Dad made the prettiest stools and chairs and now I'd help him full-time.

I scanned in photos of a three-legged stool, baseball bats, a cedar chest. Later, maybe I'd upload a video of Dad leaning over his lathe. I wanted to get it across that we were artisans, not assembly-line workers.

But you know what they say about leaving your day job. I could improve things, do some legwork, and maybe, over time, I'd expand the market. Meanwhile, we'd be two bachelors, living on venison and potatoes.

I packed books and clothes into my car and carried 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. And boxes of books, of course.

I didn't expect company but kept that second chair as a desk. I avoided the lounge and the staff avoided me, except for Cynthia Moore, who poked her head into my office once or twice. "Mr. Short-Timer," she said, smiling her sad smile. "Maybe you're the lucky one."

"Maybe I am."

"Still. If they want to get you, you don't give them ammunition."

I looked up from bagging the old woman's trash but couldn't hold Cynthia's eyes. 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—"

"Where else are people going to meet?" She laughed, too. "And we don't work together anymore, right?"

I turned toward Millie's garbage again. "I'll call you," I almost said, but couldn't get the words out.

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.

Was it Hope?

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 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."

"No doubt."

"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, merely the protagonist of my boring life. I was as boring, as nutty, as mortal, as poor Millie

Pace. As boring and 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 motel before crashing in on my old dad. Maybe I could finish the first draft of my novel.

I might call it, *The Predator*.

Then the strangest thing of all: just as I reached for the ignition, Hope Landers appeared by the hood. She looked nice. She was dressed up, not for a date but professionally, as if for an interview.

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, Good Lord, she's the girl next door.

"We could talk," she said. "Right now!"

We could talk, and have dinner, and make love on the carpet of my apartment without furniture. "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."