

The Little Free Library Thief

The little free libraries had been cropping up all throughout the neighborhood. Oval remembered the first time he'd seen one. He'd been moved by the novelty and whimsy of the thing; its inviting little door and free contents were a stark contrast to the grey monotonies of urban life. But as with most things, Oval's sense of novelty soon gave way to his enterprising selfishness and the little free libraries had become the center of his latest scheme.

"Who fills these things with such garbage?" Oval muttered, as he bent to peer at the titles in the mailbox-sized library in front of him. Half the books were harlequin romance novels, and the other half were fraying textbooks from bygone classrooms. Oval scooped out the books and stacked them in a black milk crate. With the little free library empty, he got to work. He reached into his duffle-bag, past the hatchet and carpenter's saw to the industrial pipe cutter and pulled it free. Most of the little free libraries were situated on wooden posts, but every once in a while, he found one like this one, with a wrist-sized metal pipe supporting it. Oval fixed the pipe-cutting apparatus to the pole and walked the handle around 360 degrees, like a brief may-pole ceremony. Oval released the pipe-cutter, gave the pipe a kick, and watched the little free library topple into the soft grass. With his bounty freed, Oval hauled his duffle and the milk-crate of books back into his 15-passanger van.

When he returned to the toppled library, he found a black cat curled up atop it. The cat lazily arched its back and purred. Oval squinted in the darkness. He bent and stroked the cat's rough fur. The cat moved to nuzzle his hand, and its claws made small clinking noises against the glass of the library's door. "You're gonna have to get, now, cat," he whispered into the night. He stood up straight, positioned his boot right beneath the belly of the cat, and flung it forward with a launching swing of his leg. Then he nodded and dragged the little decapitated library into his van.

It was a surprisingly lucrative enterprise. While Oval's eBay store *littlusedbooks* had very few customers, his Esty store *Lucky Little Libraries*, on the other hand, was making a killing. Oval re-painted and

shipped his plundered libraries all over the country. He sold them for anywhere between fifty and a two hundred dollars, depending on the quality of the construction.

He was diligent about his process, Oval. After making his rounds to mail-off books and refrigerator boxes filled with the little libraries, Oval would scope out a target for the night. There was no registry for little free libraries, so Oval had to drive around to find them. This was his favorite part of the day. He felt the allure of the hunt. He attuned his gaze to the colorful mail-box-like shape and drove around searching for them in a hungry haze.

It was during one of these hazy searches that Oval stumbled upon a little free library outside a public library. His immediate reaction was to laugh. “Who builds a little free library outside of a fuckin’ real library?” He said to his steering wheel. “Towns gone to the fuckin’ doorknobs.” (Oval favorite pejorative was to call folks doorknobs, he attributes this to being called a doorknob by his father. He distinctly remembers the moment he realized realizing that a doorknob actually refers to the knob on a door.)

After his initial amusement, however, Oval blinked and then blinked again. He stared at the small public library before him. It was a stark building. Built in the 60’s, it had the architectural flair of a slab of sidewalk. It was blocky and small, with a roof that looked water damaged. In the surrounding lots, weeds and shady characters had replaced condemned buildings, so the public library stood alone against the backdrop of urban decay. A peeling realtor sign stood in front of the library, and by the sun-faded look of it, it had been there for a while. The library wasn’t in operation anymore. But Oval *remembered* this library. He remembered it painted and surrounded by a well-trimmed curbside lawn. This, after all, was *his* library.

You see, growing up, Oval’s family had been extremely poor. After a series of apartments, each more decrepit than the last, Oval’s father had dropped the kids off at the small public library one morning. They’d stayed there for two years. They didn’t always sleep in the library – that is actually fairly hard to pull-off, but the library served as a permanent home base during the day. It was just about the only thing that *was* permanent during that period of Oval’s life.

Initially the library was an adventurous palace to explore – a huge upgrade. Oval and his two older sisters would roam through the racks playing tag and hide-and-go-seek for hours. There were free public computers where Oval could escape to play flash games and stumble through the depths of the internet. The library staff tolerated Oval’s rambunctiousness with a lot of grace – he wasn’t the first kid they’d ended up babysitting.

Oval realized, after a wave of nostalgia, that he was just staring into the glass doors of the library. He thought about going inside. He actually entered into the foyer, where there were still bulletins and racks of the local newspaper. Oval stood in the foyer looking through the glass windows into his childhood stomping ground. Oval wondered why anyone would continue to restock the newspapers in a library that is closed. The latest newspaper was from the previous Sunday. Oval picked up a newspaper and opened it. He looked around. He did not want to draw attention to himself, but no one was around. His eyes scanned over the newspaper page below him.

“Little-Library Vandal Strikes Again” read the headline of page 4. Oval’s eyes widened and the corners of his mouth rose into an unconscious smile. He tapped his foot rapidly against the linoleum. “Of the town’s 46 little-libraries, 23 have been removed and stolen by an unknown culprit. Authorities suspect that these thefts are the work of a single individual rather than a larger movement. ‘As far as our investigation can tell, there’s no reason to believe that there’s any organized effort to remove these little libraries’ said the police investigator, ‘As a matter of fact, we are having a hard time imagining anyone who’d want to vandalize the pleasant things.’”

Oval rolled up the newspaper into a tight cylinder. He batted it, over and over again, into his open palm. He turned his back to the glass doors opening into the library. He looked out at the street. A freezing rain was just beginning to trickle down onto the pavement outside. The roads would be a sheet of ice soon. Oval tightened his grip on the newspaper and grinned like cat. There was work to be done.

Little libraries #24 through #45 were trickier to capture. Oval plotted his course diligently, taking out the more challenging libraries (those in public areas) first and leaving the easier libraries (those with a lot of surrounding cover) for last. Oval spent time studying the police response to his mischief. They often sent out patrols at night. However, they couldn't cover all the remaining libraries at once. So Oval simply looked for the gaps, created necessary distractions, and sawed down the libraries with haste. He'd purchased a battery-powered chainsaw for the task.

Oval had ceased selling the libraries on Etsy. He stashed them in a narrow alley between two residential garages. He'd sell them someday, he told himself. But it wasn't about the money anymore. "The Little Free Library 'Thief'" had gained some notoriety, but his identity was still a mystery. Oval loved to read the newspapers these days. The predominant theory was that a local Christian-science bookstore owner was responsible for the library take-downs. One newspaper read quoted him saying, "I suspect the lord is pleased to see all those damnable copies of *Twilight* sequels being cast from the eyes of his people."

By little-library #45 there was no longer an easy approach to chopping down libraries. The police were onto Oval and were patrolling the remaining two libraries constantly. Library #45 was positioned on a large main street right outside an old Victorian home. The library itself was a model-version of the Victorian house, complete with gabled roof and decorative dormers.

By this point, Oval's antics had made front page news. A crew of angry upper-class families had banded together to protect the remaining two libraries. Mostly the group was made up of former little-library owners whose libraries had been stolen. An opinion column had called them "Little-Library Legionnaires." They had leaned into this title and in recent days were dressing up in knight-costumes to stand vigil around the two remaining libraries. When he'd read about them, Oval had laughed so hard his chest hurt. He also formulated a plan.

One night, Oval infiltrated the Little-Library Legionnaires. He'd made himself a helmet out of a disposable pie-tin, with a bent book-cover as a visor. He approached the small gathering of four Legionnaires.

They were each wearing a few half-assed pieces of armor and were leaning back in lawn-chairs around little-library #45. A grill was positioned in the lawn and Oval could smell charcoal and cooking meat.

“Welcome to the party,” Said a tall man wearing a plaid snap-front shirt. “Nice helmet. He hit your house too?”

“Yeah” Oval said. “And I’d just built the damn thing as an anniversary present for my wife. He took it out a week after I cemented that thing in the ground.”

“Well help yourself to a beer and a brat from the grill. I’m Stephen.”

“Charles” Oval said, extending his hand. “Good to meet you.”

The “party” consisted mostly of middle-aged parents telling stories of their youth, the antics of their kids (most of whom were away at college), and drinking quite a bit of beer. Oval found that he didn’t have to do much to participate – just laugh when expected and nod along to the boring recounting. Judging by their stories, Oval got the sense that these folks were all feeling stagnant in their settled domestic lives.

“Bunch of fuckin’ doorknobs,” Oval muttered to himself as he left the group to pee in a bush.

Eventually the group tired and went to sleep in their curb-side tents. Oval bid his farewells to the group and began to stroll down the street. He didn’t leave, however. Instead, he slunk into a nearby bush and waited. He crouched there, uncomfortably, listening for the sound of snores. Once they came, Oval quietly unzipped his backpack and pulled out the small electric chainsaw. It wasn’t the quietest tool, but it would be pretty quick he reckoned. Oval slunk back to the curbside lawn. He looked around once and then slipped over to the street. There was a large manhole right next to this particular little library (one of the reason’s he’d saved it for the end). He lifted the manhole cover and set it aside.

The ripping sound from the chainsaw was loud, but Oval made quick work of the wooden post holding up the library. With a few deft movements he sawed the library clean and slung it over to the open manhole, where it slid into the storm sewer with a distant plopping sound. Flashlights were on now. Stephen was stirring in his tent, yelling for the others to wake up. There wasn’t much time. Oval grabbed his chainsaw

and slid himself down into the manhole making sure to cover the hole behind him. Looking up, Oval saw the flash of a police car as it's lights lit-up the street above him. He grinned to himself and scurried down into the knee-deep sewage. Oval dragged the library through the sewage like a child dragging their teddy bear to a play date. By the time the legionnaires realized what happened, he'd be all the way through the sewer and back to his van. He'd done it. One library to go.

After a long getaway drive and a lengthy shower, Oval kicked back in his van's back seat. He pulled out the books from his latest conquest and began flipping through them. Most of the books seemed quite old, with printing dates ranging from the 1920's – 1930s. There were a few Faulkner titles, a copy of *The Land of Plenty* by Robert Cantwell, and a hardback copy of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie. The hardback was heavy, heavier than it should be. Oval hefted it in his hands and opened the front cover to an inscription:

“March 29, 1932

Dear Son, I am ashamed by how estranged we've become. I've chosen work over family all these years. I regret it now and wish I could've made things different. I wish I'd supported you in your aspirations. I wish I'd been kinder to your mother. I wish I'd stayed home more often. I wish I'd have told Mr. Forsythe to just fuck off, frankly. But I didn't. Now I'm old, sick, and alone. With so little friends and so little influence. I want you to have this book. If you ever cared for me, ever loved me – please read it through to the back cover. It might make all the difference in your life.

Love,

Dad”

Oval read the inscription a few times over, hefting the book in his hand appraisingly. He thought about his own father, dead now. He flipped to the first chapter and began to read.

Over the next days, Oval found himself oddly entranced by *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.” He wasn’t particularly interested in the content, Oval had never much cared about influencing people. He just kept thinking about the last sentences of the inscription, “if you ever cared for me, ever loved me – please read it through to the back cover. It might make all the difference in your life.” Whenever he re-read that inscription, Oval felt a tingle run across his spine. He couldn’t quite place the feeling.

The book also promised to, “get you out of a mental rut, give you new ideas and new ambitions.” Oval *was* feeling a desperate need for new ideas. Oval had a major problem on his hands. Little library #46 was the little library outside of *his* library – the small, closed public library where Oval had grown up. Oval had saved it for last because he thought the overgrown lots surrounding it would make for easy cover. Over the preceding days, however, a constant security force had been deployed to the little library. Although police patrolled past the library more frequently than usual, they had many other crimes to attend to in this neighborhood. The security force was made up mostly of the Little Library Legionnaires. Evidently their cause had gained a following, because there were often reporters there interviewing them. Their size had tripled as well. Nearly all the former owners of the city’s little libraries were now gathered. They took shifts guarding the last little library day and night.

Oval spent a lot of time parked near the library, peering out his van windows at the gathered legionnaires. It was a risky move, spending so much time parked there. But Oval was captivated by watching the gathering. They were having so much fun. In the abandoned lot next to the library, middle-aged couples played bocci ball with their scampering children. Before every meal, the legionnaires would line up and salute the little library. This was always followed with a lot of laughter.

“I brought them all together,” Oval muttered to himself, incredulous. “They’d never have gathered together like this if I hadn’t stolen their damn libraries.” He shook his head and went back to the last few pages of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. When he reached the end of the book, Oval looked down, unimpressed by the last few chapters. His mind was racing with his current predicament, but no new ideas had emerged from his reading. He tapped the back cover anxiously. Then he felt it. The tip of his finger hit

something hard and metallic hidden behind the dustcover of the book. He cautiously peeled the cover back and five coins fell to the ground. Golden coins. They were accompanied by a small piece of paper. The handwriting on the paper was the same as the inscription. It read, “Here son - this is how you really win friends and influence people. I hope you’ll remember me as gracious, if not warm.”

Oval picked up the coins, eyebrows raised. They had the head of lady liberty on one side and an eagle on the other. They were minted in 1856 and, at the time, worth twenty dollars. He promptly googled, “gold twenty-dollar coin 1856.” When he saw the results, he dropped his phone. They were worth ten thousand dollars apiece.

A week later, Oval parked his van directly in front of little library #46. He wore a corduroy suit that he’d purchased for this day. He had on leather work gloves and carried his electric chainsaw in one hand. When he approached the curb, the legionnaires stopped their conversations and turned his way. He gave them a wave and a beaming smile. A few of them set down their beers and crossed their arms.

“Hey pal, what’re you trying to do with that chainsaw?” One of them asked, as Oval drew nearer.

“I am going to saw down that little free library,” said Oval with gleaming confidence.

“Um, no you aren’t! We’re calling the police!” said a woman in a yellow cardigan.

“Isn’t he supposed to be sneaky?” one of the children said in an ineffective whisper.

“Stephen, he’s got a *chainsaw*” said a wife, holding back the arm of her husband. Stephen, from the last little library vigil, paused and stepped back next to his wife. Meanwhile, Oval flipped on the chainsaw and the engine made a loud whirr as he swiftly sliced through the base of the final little free library.

All the legionnaires stood, speechless around their fallen idol. They had the look of partiers who suddenly noticed a turd in the middle of their living room. After an uncomfortably long moment, Stephen stepped forward.

“What the hell man? You realize you just gave yourself up. The police will be here any minute and there’s like a million witnesses.”

“Bring the police! I haven’t done anything against the law” Oval said, his yellow teeth in an over-eager smile.

“Dude, you just defaced someone’s property... definitely against the law” said Stephen, shaking his head. “Also, what the hell! Why are you destroying all these little free libraries! They just bring people joy!”

“You all seem like you’re having a great time. Plenty of joy to go around” said Oval, gesturing at a case of beer. “Unfortunately, that *does* need to come to an end. I just purchased this property, you see, and I’m planning on a bit of remodeling... which I’ve just begun by removing that little library. Anyway, if you don’t believe me, have a look at this deed.” Oval pulled the deed to the library out of his jacket pocket and handed it to the slack jawed Stephen. The funds from the rare coins had been more than adequate to put a down payment on the ramshackle library.

“I can’t believe this,” stammered Stephen, reading over the deed.

“Believe it! My library is mine. *And* it will be open for business soon!” Oval threw out his hands with a dramatic flair. “In the meantime, however,” Oval’s cheery tone deepened, “get the off my lawn, you fuckin doorknobs!”