

Jack Smiles 20,000 books

“Books? The money’s in books?”

“That’s what Little Louis told me. The old teach hallowed out some books and stashed the dough in ‘em.”

“The fuck you mean, hallowed out?”

“I’d show you, if you if you had a book, but then you’d have know how to fucking read.”

“I can read plenty. And I got books on the back porch.”

Walt did have books on the porch. Years of phone books.

Grandy opened one of the phone books on the kitchen table and flipped back about a third of the pages. He cut a rough square out of the middle third of the pages with his knife, took a roll of money out of his pocket put it in the hole he had made and closed the book.

“Like that,” he said. Looking at Walt.

“So all we got to do is go to the old guy’s house and take the fucking books. We gotta move fast, find the fucking books and take ‘em,” Walt said.

Max Wells was bibliophile and Jules Verne fanatic with a dream: to open the biggest damn used bookstore in Jersey and call it 20,000 Books. He was living in Philadelphia in the 1970s with his partner Hastings Monteford when he found his dream catcher in the dying New Jersey beach town where he grew up. Taking a break from cleaning out his

late parents' house, he walked toward the beach on Arctic Ave and there it was: The old Dime Bank building on the corner of Promenade Ave a block in from the boardwalk.

“Max,” Hastings said over cheese steaks and a couple of bottles of Schafer’s,” when Max got back to Philly, “the storefronts on Promenade that aren’t boarded up are two dive bars, an amateur strip club and a punk rock venue for battle of the bands losers.”

“How do you know, you’ve never seen it?”

“How do I know? You told me, like 20 minutes ago.”

“Oh yeah,” Max said emerging from his reverie. “But, Hastings, Hurricane Diane tore everything apart. The town will come back. And the bank, it’s perfect. It could be a destination for every bookworm in the tri-states.”

“Doesn’t matter. You don’t have the money for a down payment and no living bank is going to give you a loan for an old dead one.”

Hastings was right, but even so, somebody did buy the bank. Max saw the “sale pending” sign the next time he went back home. So, that was it. Max sat on the bench across Promenade from the bank brown bagging a Heineken. He stared at the sign, but it didn’t change to read “20,000 Books.”

Max went back to his job as a shift manager at a national chain bookstore in the King of Prussia Mall, feeling inadequate and undeserving of Hastings who worked mega hours as a lawyer for 25 Ford Dealerships in Pennsylvania and New Jersey and played bass in the Rugbeaters Blues Band on weekends. How the hell did a night shift book geek get and keep a guy like Hastings? Max was depressed, but soldiered on for Hastings’ sake, going to Rugbeaters gigs and after parties and helping host a monthly dinner party at their

apartment off Rittenhouse Square.

When Max opened his Christmas present he was confused. Why did Hastings give him a set of keys?

“Oh, I forgot the paperwork,” Hastings said with a wry smile, as he hand Max the deed for the property at the corner of Promenade and Arctic Aves in Max’s home town.

“Hastings, how the hell...?”

“Don’t worry about it. I paid cash and got a sweet deal.”

Hastings wasn’t down with Max’s dream. He liked to read, sure, but he wasn’t crazy about books like Max, but then who was? At parties after a couple merlots Hastings confessed to friends he bought the bank as an investment. He figured the bookstore would flop, Max would come to his senses and Hastings would sell the bank at a profit.

He figured wrong.

Max gave his two weeks on New Year’s Day and in the middle of January turned the key on his 75-year-old granite block bank building and went to work. He hired one fulltime employee, Maddie, a redheaded hippie type and Tolkien groupie, and three part timers, local college football players for the heavy lifting. He stayed at his parents’ house Monday through Friday while he worked and went back to Philly on weekends to be with Hastings. First, Max deconstructed the interior. He sold the ornate metal wall molding, the tin ceiling and the tellers’ wickets to an architectural salvage company. Max was into books, not vintage décor. Clearing out the wickets turned the main banking area and the lobby into a 25 by 80 foot, two-story high open space. Cleaning and painting took a month. With the money from the accrotrumonts sale he bought four 50-foot long, six-foot

high, double-sided sections of retail display bookshelves and had them installed 10 feet apart down the center of the huge open space.

Along the inner wall, which abutted a dive bar, he built 15-foot high, do-it-yourself shelves, stacking wire milk crates, wooden beer cases and old dorm shelves on three-levels of cinderblocks and planks, creating a rustic thrift store look he loved. He bought two rolling stepladders with fenced landings on top and brakes on the wheels for his customers to reach the highest shelves. He bought industrial-sized wooden wire spools to use as tables in the coves between the five two-story windows soaring over Arctic Ave.

He surrounded the spools with tattered thrift store upholstered chairs and put ashtrays, bottle openers and corkscrews on them.

Along the back wall behind where the teller wickets had been, doors on the left and right led to the safe deposit room and a storage/break room. Between them was an enormous Wilson vault with an eight-foot diameter, three-foot thick steel door, where Max put his office, stored his most valuable books, and personal Jules Verne collection. Max turned the safe deposit room into a science fiction section, walling off the deposit box grids and installing shelving. He took off the outer door.

On each side of the main lobby twin stairways led to a balcony where loan officers and VPs once had offices. Max took the doors off, cleaned and painted the offices and created sections for sports, music, antiques and collectibles, and biographies. That took another month. Adjacent to the stairway entrances elevators led to the empty third and fourth floor office suites.

Max knew once he opened 20,000 Books, it would attract a lot of browsers, like beach vacationers who were rarely bought books, but wanted to see the interior of the old bank.

He stocked magazines, postcards, greeting cards, posters, t-shirts and gag gifts out front by the registers to tempt them. Max had been buying books from estates, libraries, yard sales and flea markets since he was a kid. He had them stored in rental lockers and the basement and attic of his parents' house. Now he stepped up acquisition. He put an ad in the local Jersey paper: "Buying and Hauling old books." He got a lot of responses and offered a buck a book. A lot of folks took the offer. He and the college boys stored the books in the storage/break room and the third floor offices. When he acquired a special book, such as a Scribner & Armstrong 1873 first American edition of Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon, an a Trip Around It*, he would hold it in his left hand and rub the fingers of his right hand over the debossed words on the cover. He would open the book, gently flip the pages and breath deeply through his nose taking in the odor of the book's age.

For the grand opening on Memorial Day weekend in 1976 Max mounted a 25-foot long banner reading "20,000 Books" across the third floor office windows. The Rugbeaters played, the cheese was gobbled up and the wine flowed. Seemed everyone who cornered Max had the same question. "Are there really 20,000 books?"

Max explained over and over again he didn't know how many books he had. "I named the store 20,000 Books because my favorite book is *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. I'm a book lover not a bookkeeper," he'd say and clink a glass and share a laugh with the questioner.

In the midst of the party two of Max's college kids came through the front door lugging a gift from Hastings. Max did a spit take with a mouthful of champagne and

laughed like mad as a three-dimensional oaken folk-art model of the Nautilus submarine from *20,000 Leagues* was unveiled. It was four feet long and must have weighed 100 pounds. Hastings had found it at an antique mall in Lancaster County. The college boys got up on the rolling ladders and mounted the ship over the entrance to vault, creating a perfect centerpiece. Typical Hastings, always finding the odd, yet perfect, gift. Always on the cutting edge of music and fashion, wines, technology, art, food and antiques. Hastings was a trendsetter, ahead of his time — even in death. In 1982, Hastings died of Kaposi's sarcoma. The third of their group of friends to go. Max didn't get tested. He didn't want to know.

Max consoled himself with sweet memories of the Februarys when he closed the store and he and Hastings went to the islands to lie in the sun, sip Red Stripes and listen to the latest underground music Hastings had discovered. And Max consoled himself with the knowledge Hastings had lived long enough to see the bookstore succeed and admit, happily, he had been wrong. The bookstore, as Max had predicted, became a destination. It didn't make a ton of money, but did well enough to pay the bills, the payroll and acquire books with enough left over for Max to keep up his lifestyle.

The grief subsided, but the loneliness didn't. He could never fill the void in his heart, but he did develop a platonic relationship with Ken Lindsey, an English professor at the local community college and Max's best customer. Though there was an age gap of 15 years, Max and Ken became great friends. The gay guy and the old widowed teacher. Might make a good book. Ken bought a book or two a week from Max. He liked railroading, architectural, true crime and Jules Verne. Most Saturdays after Max closed the bookstore they'd meet at the Irish Pub, eat some fish and chips, drink a couple ales

and talk, mostly about books. One winter they took a trip to France for a Jules Verne convention and tour.

Just as Max had predicted the old boardwalk came back during the Big 80s economic boom, as families sought wholesome beach vacations away from spring break types and casinos. The beach was cleaned up and replenished. Round up the usual suspects for the boardwalk: The arcade and mini golf were revived; boutiques, music, candy, jewelry, and beach shops popped up. Walkup stands served hand cut French fries, hot dogs and

Ice cream. A restaurant row featuring seafood, a Chinese buffet, Italian and the Irish Pub was the centerpiece.

The bookstore thrived. It grew from a destination for bibliophiles to a must see for the burgeoning number of summer tourists looking for birthday and Christmas presents and Max stocked new books to accommodate them. He and Maddie ran it themselves in the spring and fall. In the summers he hired more part timers, mostly students from the UK and Europe.

One day Ken's son, who lived in California, called the bookstore.

"Hey I can't reach my Dad. The neighbors haven't seen him. Can you go over the house.?"

Max had a key. He was the cat-sitter when Ken was away. He found Ken on the couch, *A Floating City* open on his chest. A grin on his blue face. Max sat beside him and recited a passage from *20,000 Leagues*. "I soon felt that strange and mysterious sensation which is awakened in the mind when looking down from lofty hilltops, and now I was able to do so without any feeling of nervousness, having fortunately hardened myself to that kind of sublime contemplation. I wholly forgot who I was, and where I was. I

became intoxicated with a sense of lofty sublimity, without thought of the abysses into which my daring was soon about to plunge me.”

Max said good-bye and called Ken’s son with the news.

“Damn,” the son said. “I can’t get there for a couple days. I’ll call Marley’s for arrangements. You’ll have to let them in. Max, this may sound callous right now, but can you get rid of the books? Take, ‘em. Just take ‘em all. I can’t stand it already. That’s what my Dad wanted anyway. He wanted you to have them. There are going to be a lot of people over and there’s no place to even sit down. The garage, too. God, the garage. There’s a mountain in there. They used to be stacked in boxes and piled loose, like walls in a frigging maze.”

“Used to be?”

“Yeah, the walls came tumbling down.”

Ken’s son was right. In the house, books were piled on every surface save the couch where Ken read his last. Max had never been in the garage. He opened the door off the kitchen and took a step back, mouth agape. The kid had understated it. The garage was a wall-to-wall six-foot high volcano of books. An antenna poked through. There was a car under there.

Max called his football players. They boxed the books, hauled them to the 20,000 storeroom in Max’s van, went back and cleaned up the house and garage. Max began to sort and price them, tote by tote. He was trying to make sense of what he found in the second tote when they came.

“He died! We didn’t know, man, we’re sorry to hear that?” Grandy said to Ken’s son

when he answered the door.

“Yeah, we’re really sorry to hear that,” Walt said without conviction.

“So your old friends of my Dad’s and he had some books for you?”

“Ah, yeah. Books.”

The son wasn’t buying it. They didn’t look like any friends of his father’s. A lean guy in cheap fedora and an ill-fitting blazer over dirty jeans and a big lug in a stained Raiders jersey.

“Which books are yours and why are they here?”

“Don’t remember the names, but we’d know ‘em if we saw ‘em.”

“You’d know them if you saw them, but you don’t know the names. Who are you guys? My father didn’t have friends like you. Get away from here before I call the police.”

Walt grabbed the son by the neck and pushed him into the house. Grandy followed and shut the door. Walt pushed Ken’s son to the floor and pulled a .22.

“Jesus, Walt, take it easy,” Grandy said.

“I ain’t takin’ it easy,” and to Ken’s son, “Now where’s the old man’s fucking books?”

“They’re gone.”

“Gone where?”

Walt pushed the gun into his cheek.

“The bookstore. Down on the Promenade.”

Grandy walked out.

“Holy shit! 20,000 fucking books,” said Walt pointing his ice cream cone at the

banner on the old bank building as he and Grandy walked along the promenade. Walt elbowed Grandy and half yelled, “How we gonna find the money books outta 20,000.”

“Keep it down you asshole. Let me think.”

Grandy and Walt sat on a bench across the promenade from Max’s bookstore.

With his head down Grandy whispered, “did you kill him?”

Walt didn’t answer.

“You did you asshole, you killed him. There wasn’t supposed to be any killing.”

“Stop calling me that and come on, let’s go. Or walk away and I’ll find the money books myself,” Walt said.

“Go? We can’t just bull our way in there and open 20,000 books.”

“So what, then? What the fuck we gonna do?”

“I’ll go check things out. Get the lay. Find out what time he’s closing up. Wait here.”

“Maddie, you lock up. I’m going to stay here for a while and look through Ken’s books.”

“Miss him, don’t you.”

“I do.”

“There’s that sound again,” Maddie said. “I hear it when it’s quiet.”

“What’s it sound like?” Max asked

“I can’t believe you don’t hear it. It’s a creaking sound. Like an old chair or something.”

Max shrugged, said good-bye and went into the storeroom.

Maddie said “See ya in the morning” and headed for the front door.

Max opened the second tote and had to laugh. A giant squid stared up at him from the cover of a 20,000 Leagues copy. Max opened it to note the edition. Not much value but a nearly pristine DJ. He'd put \$15 on it. He flipped through, looking for ripped or stuck together pages and his thumb fell into a hallowed out section and the flipping stopped. Max opened the book saw four bound stacks of 100-count, ten-dollar bills. Four grand. *From Earth to the Moon*, same deal, only twenties. Another eight grand. He opened a French edition of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, fifties. Twenty thousand there. *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, hundreds. Forty thousand. Over 70 grand total.

Ken had a funny way of saving money. And where the hell'd get it. And why ruin good Verne books? Max could only guess Ken wanted him to find the money.

Max took the money books into his office, set them on his desk, stepped out and closed the vault door.

"So where does an old teach get 100 grand in cash," Walt asked as they waited for 20,000 Books to close.

"Teachers get the summers off, right?"

"Yeah."

"So every summer he and the old lady hooked up their travel trailer and visited his brother in Callie. Came back with a thousand pounds of weed."

"Good stuff?"

"Rocket fuel, man. Little Louis was one of his students. He put together a posse of his friends and they sold it by the quarter pound up and down the Jersey Shore. Nobody

suspected a thing.”

Just before Maddie put the key in the door to lock it from the outside, Gandy approached her.

“Sorry sir, we’re closed.”

“No you’re not,” he said, sticking the .22 in her side.

Walt clasped a meaty hand over her mouth from behind and shoved her back into the store.

“Lock it.”

She did.

“There’s not a lot of money here. A couple hundred in the register. You can have it. Just don’t hurt me, please.”

“Look, we don’t want to hurt you girl. We just need to know, where are the books from the old teach’s place,” Grandy did the talking.

Whimpering with fear Maddie said, “Old teach, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Ken Lindsey. Now where’s his fucking books?”

“Oh, there still in boxes. In the back. The storage area.”

“Ok. Take us there.”

Maddie led Grandy and Walt down the middle aisle. Walt held a gun to her back.

“Take it easy mister, don’t hurt me,” she said loudly enough, she hoped, for Max to hear.

As Max stepped out of his office and turned to close the vault door, he thought he heard Maddie’s footfalls, then her voice. Thought she said, “Don’t hurt me.” Confused he

turned around and saw two hard-looking guys pushing her down the aisle. They saw him and he froze. One raised a gun.

“Don’t move bookworm. Put your hands up.”

They flanked him. The fat one searched him.

“Ok, put you’re hands down. Now where’s the old teach’s books and don’t tell me you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“I’m sorry but I really don’t.”

Walt shoved the gun in his ribs saying, “What were you doing in that fucking vault?”

“It’s my office. I just closed it for the night.”

“Yeah, well now you’re going to open it.”

“I can’t. It’s on a timer.”

“Come on bookworm,” Grandy said. “We know better than that. This ain’t a fucking bank no more, now open it.”

Walt pulled Maggie by the hair and knocked her to the floor with a hard slap, then pointed his gun at her head.

“Now open the fucking vault,” Walt said.

“Oh damn, please don’t hurt her.” Max spun the combination on the wheel and it unlocked with a loud click. Walt held a gun on Max and Maddie and Grandy went in the office.

“Holy shit,” he yelled from inside. “That was easy. The books are right here on a table and loaded with dough.”

Walt ran in for a look. In a few seconds they both stepped out and stood side by side at the threshold. Grandy held the tote with the books. Walt leveled his gun.

“Sorry, but we can’t leave no wit...”

With a loud creak and snap the Nautilus broke loose from the wall above the vault threshold and crashed onto Walt and Grandy knocking them down and pinning their heads to the floor with their legs sticking out. The tote with the money books hit the floor and the books spilled out at Max’s feet. Their guns clattered down alongside them.

Blood seeped out from under the Nautilus. Neither man moved or made a sound.

Maddie looked down at the Nautilus and burst into laughter. “That’s what I was hearing.”

Max looked up at the empty spot on the wall and said, “Good one, Hastings.”