Issue No. 17 $4.00

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My Library

Marc Bookman

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My library is small and noisy, and I can walk there from my apartment. I like to go there because everyone is always chatting amiably and browsing through best-selling novels and the latest magazines. Thursday is very popular, especially in the morning when Mr. Sedgwick delivers the new weeklies. What a joy it is to watch Mr. Hunsinger and Mr. Goldstein sitting casually near the magazine rack while Mrs. Leiter fumbles to put the latest *New Yorker* into its smeared plastic cover. I often bet secretly with myself on which man, without appearing to care in the slightest, gets it first. I have even heard Mr. Hunsinger remark, "Oh, the New Yorker's here," as if it had somehow slipped onto the shelves by itself, catching him by surprise. The lucky man, whoever he is, puts his feet up on the nearest chair (much to the anguish of Mrs. Leiter) and starts from page one. How relaxed the winner seems, how much he enjoys the cartoons, how he milks the edginess of his compatriot. The loser, and all too often it is Mr. Goldstein, must satisfy himself with *Newsweek* or the latest stunning bestseller spanning six centuries of English aristocracy. Like a mad reaper he thrashes through these pages, stopping only to correct historical inaccuracies and curse the decline of the novel.

Mr. Hunsinger is a sagging old man who wears his clothes as if he has recently gained thirty pounds. He spends long, luxurious minutes perusing the Nightlife section. Although he hasn't been to New York in thirty-two years, he is quite certain that he has missed nothing.

"I saw Bird and Pres on the same bandstand one night," he says, "and for a buck. One lousy dollar, imagine that. You know how much that ticket would cost today?" I am not at all sure who these people are, but now I know better than to ask. Once I confessed that I had never heard of Art Tatum, only to be told, with a sneer, that he was "just the greatest piano player ever, no reason you *should* have heard of him." Then came the pause, the deadly Hunsinger pause: "You went to college, you say?" Back then I didn't understand such petty jealousy and bitterness; I used to defend my education with great vigor. Now I only try to be civil; I nod my head and feign interest in their ramblings. It is important that the regulars get along.

"Are you planning to take a trip to New York," I ask, making conversation.

"Oh, I don't think so," Mr. H. says. "I just like to see which of the old boys are still making the rounds, like this week Tommy Flanagan is at Bradley's, Max Roach is playing at the Vanguard, ah, the old four-four on the ride cymbal . . ." He

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gets a faraway look in his eyes, starts tapping out an unheard rhythm on his knees, then moves over to his table and picks up two pens, tapping—there is no point in talking to him when he gets like this. Even Mr. Goldstein urges me to sit down, knowing as he does that Mr. Hunsinger cannot read and play drums at the same time.

Mr. Goldstein looks at me as if to say, "Leave the old man alone, why do you rile him so?" He has told me many times—and not always when I am disturbing Mr. Hunsinger's reading—that I am better off staying in my seat than flitting about looking for distractions. "You want distractions," he says, "you should go to the zoo, watch the giraffes eat leaves off the trees. For writing you must be sitting down, not pacing the stacks or bothering Hunsinger."

Mr. Goldstein is my editor. He is a small rail of a person, slightly hunched and with a great penchant for foolish caps that he insists are meant to be worn indoors, and particularly in libraries. Reading hats, he calls them. He is ashamed of his baldness. Imagine a man his age ashamed of that! It is true that few men are quite as bald as he, but he is well past the age where one is supposed to have hair on one's head. I suggested once that he get a toupée; he said, "I have never tried one, they are too itchy." In this regard he is much like Mr. Hunsinger. Old men, foolishly set in their ways, should be left alone. It is easier for all concerned.

Often I have asked Mr. Goldstein why he feels qualified to edit my work. To my undying gratitude, he has never questioned my qualifications to write. Instead he replies, "Have you read Eudora Welty?" or "You are no doubt familiar with the work of Katherine Anne Porter." No doubt familiar! Such a ridiculous implication is enough to make me laugh in his face, and were he not my editor I would do so. He is hiding something from me, but it is not prior editorial experience with Katherine Anne Porter. More likely his early years were spent running numbers or making book in the back of a barber shop. There is a touch of the desperado in Mr. Goldstein; at some point in the not too recent past he wore dark shirts and white ties.

They are sly dogs, these men. Both are interested in Mrs. Leiter, but neither will admit it, even out of the other's presence. They are not the slightest bit deterred by her marital status, although Mr. Goldstein at least acknowledges Mr. Leiter's existence. "Your husband is doing well, I hope," he might say when he comes to the library in the morning. Mr. Hunsinger merely grunts when he hears of the husband, as if to express disapproval not only of him but of the institution generally. Of course, Mr. Hunsinger is married, and to the same woman for the past thirty-seven

years. (It is rumored that this is his second marriage, the first being with a prostitute. These rumors, I happen to know, were started by my editor, and are completely without foundation. Yet Mr. H. has never denied them. To deny such claims would lend them dignity, he says; but there is no hiding in his grim features a pride at being considered a rogue. Secretly he feels that he has some catching up to do with Mr. Goldstein in this area.) But he has said more than once that his marriage is not what he expected it to be.

"And when did you first discover this, Hunsinger," Mr. Goldstein wants to know. "Thirty-six years ago?" I have seen this baiting before, and I know that Mr. Hunsinger cannot ignore it. It is not in his nature.

"I knew from my first day on earth that Man was not meant for monogamy, but there were pressures, and I thought marriage would alleviate them."

"You couldn't get laid, is that it?" Mr. Goldstein loves to use such language; he considers it both modern and racy. To himself he repeats: "Hunsinger couldn't get laid. How about that."

"It's the institution that fails, not the marriage." Mr. Hunsinger is an advocate of free love. My editor calls him a "hipster." Mr. Hunsinger makes no secret, at least to us, of the fact that he lusts after Mrs. Leiter. "Her flanks," he says, "that's how you judge a woman. You look at Leiter, you see a woman who knows how, and is not afraid of the knowledge. Goldie, look at her and tell me I'm wrong."

"Hunsinger, don't work yourself up for nothing," Mr. Goldstein says. His wife died ten years ago, and he claims that his interest in women died with her. What a liar he is! You should see him cavort about Mrs. Leiter, especially in the early morning when she is straightening the library. Mr. Hunsinger doesn't arrive until ten, when the D bus comes, and this gives Mr. Goldstein a full hour without any competition. If only Mr. H. could see how he fawns over her, helping her with the book cart, opening the side door, even putting the morning newspaper in those confounded wooden holders.

"I have been rereading Spinoza's *Ethics*," he says to her. Rereading! "I assume you haven't read them recently, but I recommend it. Freedom coming from the knowledge of God, it is all very refreshing . . ." What an insufferable show-off he can be, and how he flaunts the hour he has had with her when Mr. Hunsinger arrives. Dropping whatever he is reading, he might call her over, point to a passage, and say, "Isn't it funny how things appear just after you mention them. This idea, we were discussing it yesterday morning, weren't we?" Mr. Hunsinger just grunts,

as always. But after Mrs. Leiter goes back behind the desk, he says, "Goldie, you'll never get anywhere with that approach. Ideas. Take her into the stacks if you want to give her ideas."

"And you, Mr. Clark Gable," my editor replies, "you are too busy to take her into the stacks yourself?"

Mrs. Leiter, bless her soul, is spared these vulgar exchanges. She goes about her job quietly, efficiently, with little or no awareness of the seduction schemes cooked up at the round tables every morning. Oh, she is flattered by the attention she receives, but she seems to accept it as a good librarian's due. And good she is, always keeping books in their proper order and four chairs per table. (Her one fault, if it must be perceived as such, is that she plays the horses. Every day at eleven thirty she discusses her picks with Mr. Sedgwick, the postman, who apparently goes to the track in the afternoon or phones the bets in. This goes on six months a year, since she is adamant in her refusal to bet harness. Flats only, she says.) A month ago, when we won the award for the best branch library in the township, Mrs. Leiter was quite charming in her acceptance. After being prodded by Mr. Goldstein into making a speech, she responded beautifully, thanking everyone from the head librarian to Mr. Tillis, who cleans the bathroom on Tuesday and Thursday. She also singled me out as a regular who, "along with many others, created the sort of award-winning atmosphere a neighborhood library should have." You can imagine the stir *that* caused among the old men, as jealous and desirous of attention as they are. Every day for a week thereafter they discussed it, in tones just loud enough for me to hear.

"I hear some young stud is doing the job on Mrs. Leiter."

"You don't say."

"Yes, and he's a writer."

"Well, that explains it."

"I suppose so. Women love writers."

"How can ordinary men even compete?"

"It is a problem, isn't it."

They weren't witty, not in the least, and I ignored them as best I could, though the reading room has only three tables, and they are not far apart. But Mrs. Leiter had aggravated an already existing problem by mentioning me in her acceptance speech. You see, by this time she had taken a great interest in my writing. A professional interest, she called it—she considers library science and writing to be closely related fields, inasmuch as words are central to each. She enjoyed dropping

books off at my table, often opened to a particular passage or story that she fancied. My progress, in writing and understanding the human condition, became an overriding concern of hers. It was around this time that Mr. Goldstein became my editor.

Mr. Goldstein owns a red marker with a very large round tip. He often grabs pages from my hands before they are even completed, slashing at them like a lunatic until they are a bloody mess. I affect an air of indifference; I read or stare into space or perhaps even begin to fill another page. But I can't prevent my eyes from straying to watch his flamboyant gestures. He edits as if he were conducting the Philharmonic; his long arrows and overlapping circles snare my attention. When he finishes the manuscript his style changes. The red line magically transforms to a fine point, and his handwriting becomes small, precise, and murderous: "My dear boy," he writes, "grammatical corrections aside, this story is a vast improvement on your last, but I fear that still you are not taking my suggestions to heart. Your plots are so weak as to be nonexistent, and your character development is a tiresome summary of qualities best presented on a resume, not in a story. Heed my advice. Remember, an *unpublished* writer must be open to new ideas . . ." What unmitigated joy he gets from the use of italics!

But all this is prelude to what happened yesterday. First, at a few minutes past noon, a young woman walked into the reading room and sat down at my table. Not that this was the least bit unusual; as I said earlier, there are only a few tables to choose from. But Mr. Goldstein found it "a fantastic coincidence that two such young people would find themselves face to face in a small library."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Hunsinger, "a fantastic coincidence."

It wouldn't have been so bad were it not very obvious that they wanted their contrived conversation overheard. And, to make matters worse, the woman glared at me every few seconds, as if I were somehow responsible. Let me assure you, however, that by now the nuts were running the asylum.

"Ignore them," I whispered, "they are crazy old goats."

She shook her head, and I took that as an indication that she understood. Her chair was shifted over toward the stacks so that I could only see her profile; she was as pale as chalk and seemed almost to fade into the bland background of new novels. Yet she was not unpretty, aside from pasty rouged cheeks and a bright red mouth. No doubt she was a serious student, and, although normally shy with women, I was in the mood to talk with someone my own age. Leave it to Messrs. Goldstein and Hunsinger to make a romantic rendezvous out of a little small talk.

"How are you," I said.

"Busy," she said.

Ordinarily I would then have excused myself and begun writing at a torrid clip whatever came to mind. Stream of consciousness training, I call it, and it usually reads something like this: "Voices loud in the library. Mommy can I read this the table is round and smooth oh christ this is stupid." But yesterday, with the old men watching, indeed hoping, for my failure, I refused to be put off. For a second my editor's advice about distractions ran through my head, but the hell with it. Besides, her voice, if a little squeaky, was interesting in its brusqueness.

"You're working on a big paper?" A brilliant deduction, considering the hardback edition of *The Elements of Style* she had in front of her. My editor has often recommended the section entitled "Avoid a succession of loose sentences."

"Thesis," she said proudly, "in modern American lit."

"What's your topic?"

"The failure of the American hero to reach or face adulthood," she said. I thought she was warming up a bit, as people often do when you discuss an interest of theirs. "You know, Huck Finn, Nick Adams, Holden Caulfield," she said by way of explanation.

"I write, myself," I said. I heard one of the old men, I'm not sure which, cough loudly. Almost a guffaw.

"What else do you do? To pay the bills. You know." She said that almost no one could make a living as a writer these days.

I said, "I deliver chicken for the place around the corner." I thought she might be losing interest. "Mostly I write, though. Short stories."

"Mostly he writes," Mr. Hunsinger echoed.

"Yes," my editor replied, "short stories." It was only then that I remembered that I had that morning given my most recent manuscript to Mr. Goldstein. I went on, bravely, I thought, with the conversation at hand.

"Who do you like to read?" she asked.

"Just about everybody," I said. My editor snorted. "Hunsinger, take a look at this," he said. I should point out again that their conversation was considerably louder than it had to be. "Imagine calling this writing." He held a few pages up to the light, more to satisfy his sense of theatrics than to aid Mr. Hunsinger in reading. This was an intentional breach of confidence on my editor's part.

"You'll have to excuse them," I said. "The truth is, they don't take too well to strangers." She glanced over her shoulder and then back at me. I thought she

looked a little skittish. When she started to gather her books, I reassured her that both men were perfectly sane. Perfectly, I repeated, as Hemingway would have. She didn't pick up on it. Some American Lit major.

In the meantime, my editor and his sidekick were reading selected passages from my story out loud. Of course, out of context the words sounded like absolute drivel. Not to mention the canned laughter that went with every sentence.

"He calls this writing," my editor said. There's nothing like an editor for loyalty, I always say.

By now the young woman, whose name I never even knew, had decided that no work was to be accomplished at our library. She gathered her books in her arms, groaning under the weight, but refused any offer of help. "You've done quite enough," she said. I can only assume she meant the "you" in its plural sense. The atmosphere was a bit disquieting, I admit, and not conducive to the writing of an academic treatise. But I can hardly be blamed for the behavior of the other patrons. I walked her to the door—followed her, actually—and tried to explain the sordid motivations that drove these scoundrels. I mentioned that Mrs. Leiter liked me the best and cared enough to suggest stories I should read. I pointed out that I was substantially younger than either of them, and freer than they could ever be. And she had to understand, an attractive young woman sitting down at my table would only exacerbate their sense of loss and missed opportunity; The Love Song of Goldstein and Hunsinger, as it were. Surely she could understand that, couldn't she? Of course, I said this rather quickly, and I'm not sure she picked it all up.

"This just isn't my day," she said. For all I know she may have been upset by something that happened before she came in, or just plain bored by her twentieth Nick Adams fishing story. Whatever, she kept walking. She had a nice figure; I took note of it while she was leaving. It had rained for about two weeks straight, and to keep out of the mud she had to jump from stone to stone until she reached the sidewalk. It was a sight to see. But when I returned, no more than a few seconds later, there was a fire on the tiled floor. I knew right away it was my story. I stamped the flames out as quickly as I could, but each step I took seemed to push the fire into a new area. By the time the pages were cool enough to pick up, the charred remains crumbled in my hands. I waved the smoke out of the air, I said I couldn't believe they had set my story on fire.

"It was a lousy story," Mr. Goldstein said.

"What story," said Mr. H.

I took the remnants of my manuscript and left, but before I did I spoke to

Mrs. Leiter at the desk, and this morning I'm in my usual seat, just as if nothing happened. Today is Thursday, and Mr. Sedgwick is due in an hour or so. When the mail comes, the old men will be sitting coyly waiting as always for the new magazines. But Mrs. Leiter has agreed to bring me *The New Yorker* as soon as it arrives. She's not even bothering to put it in its plastic cover. In fact I've arranged for her to come to my table and announce, somewhat ceremoniously, that "the latest *New Yorker* is here and I thought you might like to read it." Then I'm going to sit back, leisurely, and read every word, even if it takes all day and I'm bored to tears.