

THE COFFEE SHOP

I met Terry on one of those early spring afternoons at a small coffee shop that we favored. The coffee at our coffee shop wasn't particularly outstanding. Some people will only drink coffee that constantly amazes them, but neither Terry nor I cared about our coffee in that way. This coffee shop had the perfect amount of seating space available for its customers. Mostly large booths that could fit four people, but you hardly ever found four people sitting in one booth. Often you'd find just two, and usually they would be strangers to each other, and wouldn't look up much from behind their newspaper or computer. It was that kind of coffee shop, so Terry and I both liked it.

"I read some short stories today by Murakami."

"Hmm. Which ones?" said Terry.

"I don't know. I can't remember names. They're all kind of the same, though."

"So why read more than one?"

"I guess I keep hoping that one will stick out. You know, sort of be the one."

Terry leaned back against the vinyl that covered the booth's cushions. "That seems like a waste of time. And it sounds like you're talking about a woman. 'I'm just looking for the one,'" he mimicked me. 'Hoo-ha! Maybe this one will be it!'"

"The thing that bothers me more actually," I said, ignoring him, "is that I wasn't able to remember what I'd read."

"That's ok, I don't remember most of the women I've slept with either."

"No, no" I shook my head, slightly annoyed, "I really couldn't remember the stories after I read them. Not a single word. It was really disturbing. It's as if I was one of those old film projectors --- the kind with two reels. The stories got plugged in and spun through me under the projection glass frame by frame, and then ended up on some other reel that I had no connection to. And I had no idea what I'd just seen, though I'd seen the whole thing. I can't even remember a single title."

“See, that’s your mistake,” Terry said, “Short stories shouldn’t have titles. They usually aren’t long enough or good enough to merit one. These authors, they’re just messing with you. If they have something to say, let them write it out in a good long book with an appropriate title. Half the stories out there make no sense, why should their titles matter? It’s not as if any great insight will come to anyone because the story they’ve just read is called ‘Sisterfucker’ or something.’

“So you think I shouldn’t be worried that I didn’t remember those stories.”

“I think you just need a good woman,” he said, looking into his empty mug. “Don’t worry, that’s easier to find than a good cup of coffee.” He pushed his cup away and prepared his bag to leave. “Normally I wouldn’t care, but the quality here has really gone down. What’s wrong with this place anyway?”

That night I sat at home on my sofa, resting one foot on a low coffee table. I watched some familiar people on television for a while and poured myself a glass of wine from a bottle that I had opened a few days ago when I had invited a friend over to catch up. She and I had been colleagues some years earlier, but we had moved on to different offices and because of our schedules rarely saw each other any more. The wine was still good and numbed my lips slightly, which was a pleasant feeling.

I thought about what Terry had said, and went over to my bookshelf. I began reading silently the names of books that I had collected over the years. Some of them were quite dusty, or had cracked and broken spines, and occasionally I would have to pause for a few moments to make out broken lettering or to adjust the binding on a book that was in a particularly shabby state. It wasn’t well lighted in my apartment, and the wine might have been having an effect on me. In any case, I lingered over some books longer than others.

I began to hope that one book or another would jump out at me, or that maybe I’d cry out the title, say “The English Patient!” and that would be enough and I could go to bed and stop all this nonsensical reading of titles. But that didn’t happen and I could feel myself getting more confused as I remembered less and less about the names I was reading. When I finished my reading and the rest of the wine, I emptied the bookshelf. I put the books into a shopping cart that someone had stolen for our building so the tenants could carry their groceries up from the garage. I used the cart to carry my books to the large dumpster out back and went to sleep. The next morning my head felt heavy from the

drinking, but I managed to make it to work, leaving the bookcase standing empty in the apartment.

The following month I met Terry at our coffee shop. He and I had both gotten busy at work and hadn't found the time to get together. The management of the place had taken to re-arranging the furniture. They had moved some booths against the wall on one side, and placed small chairs and tables in front of them. This is another way of saying that there were no longer booths in the place. Someone had also created a website for the coffee shop, and some other deals must have been made because I saw advertisements posted all over the door announcing the sale of new pastries that had been prepared by an upscale chain bakery. Apparently the owners of the coffee shop felt that they needed these changes to increase business.

"Say," Terry asked, "how are you doing with that problem of yours about remembering titles? I hope you've given up on short stories. Really, it's the only way. A complete boycott. It's as much a protest as a way to save yourself."

Two young girls entered the coffee shop. I had never seen them before. I could tell that this was their first visit by the way they stopped speaking as soon as they walked in, and by how they eyed the corners of the place and read the entire list of items on the big chalkboard on the wall behind the register before ordering sandwiches and two lattes. I ignored them, and continued the conversation with Terry, but I began to feel troubled. I had a feeling that we were seeing the last of our coffee shop, but I was afraid to say this out loud.

Other things were on my mind anyway. Last week I had put a book into the bookcase. I had found it at a secondhand book sale being held on a sidewalk near my office. The book was called *The Collected Works of -----*. How was I going to tell Terry that I had started reading again?