
The Last Librarian

Harry Katz

There was a dim squeaking, rhythmic and repetitive, as the librarian moved through the silent stacks. It was the kind of sound that might be made by rubber heels on a freshly-polished floor, but that wasn't what caused it.

The librarian paused at the door of the Reading Room, glancing at the few patrons sitting at the tables. Mr. Gelberstein, his age-speckled index finger marking his place as he read the difficult Old English of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the large facsimile edition. Plump, white-haired Mrs. O'Neill with her favorite, the oversized illustrated edition of *The Wizard of Oz*. All the other regular visitors to the library, at their tables and in the comfortable leather-covered chairs under the pleasant, glareless lighting. The trees outside had become bare-limbed over the last week or so, the librarian thought; soon there would be an excuse to light a fire in the Reading Room's ancient log-burning fireplace. Patrons would like that.

The librarian turned towards the front of the library, intending to take the customary position behind the polished mahogany of the Circulation Desk. It was necessary every day, just after lunch, to take a few minutes to reshelve whatever books had been left in the Return slot the previous day. It meant leaving the front entrance unattended for fifteen or twenty minutes but, the librarian reasoned, that could scarcely be helped. The city government provided no assistants at all these days, not even the funds for necessary fumigation of the stacks.

It was sad, it was sad; there had been a day when the library had been staffed with not just a director but also four other qualified professionals as well. They were all gone, now. The librarian had agonized over their shortcomings and painfully turned a blind eye to their lapses in professionalism, but now would have had them back gladly. Despite the regular patrons, it was lonely. There were no longer even other directors of area libraries to commiserate with, these last five years. None, in fact, in the whole world.

It was a sad but noble burden, to be the last librarian on earth.

As the librarian moved towards the Circulation Desk there was motion at the front entrance. A patron was entering. It took but a moment to review the faces in the Reading Room. All the regulars were already there. The librarian felt a burst of excitement; this must be someone new. But, the librarian hoped, NOT another elementary school teacher eager to lead a tribe of noisy, grubby children through the neatly kept stacks and the peaceful domain of the Reading Room. He was convinced that the last such visit was the one that had brought in those pests that were infesting the bindings of some of the older books. Surely they had never been there in the Old Days. Surely one of the staff would have reported the problem.

The patron who pushed open the front door and looked about frowning did not have the air of an elementary school teacher, however. He was a young man in a neat suit and polished shoes, carrying in one hand a hollow tube ten centimeters long, a rolled up computer. His eyes met those of the librarian, and the librarian flinched. Those were not the eyes of a patron.

"Are you in charge here?" The man's voice was almost as cold as his eyes.

"I am," said the librarian nervously. Could he be from the Health Department? Had someone complained about the pests in the books? Surely not one of the regular patrons!

The man strode over to the patrons' side of the Circulation Desk, beckoning perfunctorily. Filled with trepidation, the librarian moved up beside him as he unrolled the computer. It was a standard model, with key-spaces marked in rows at the bottom and most of the ten-by-twenty centimeter rectangle taken up by the read-write screen. The man looked over grimly.

"I represent the Federal Magistrate's Office. I formally request that you input your professional ID for transmission of an official communication."

"What is this about? I haven't committed any—"

The protest trailed off as the young man's stony glare wilted resistance. The fourteen digits

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were tapped out, followed by RETURN. There was embarrassment and shame and not a little anger. Did the young man have no respect for an ancient and honorable profession? For the world's last librarian? The librarian thought despairingly of Caesar's assault on the great collection of ancient records at Alexandria.

While he was mulling this, the liquid crystal screen of the unrolled computer brightened with line after line of closely written text. The librarian read rapidly, a sinking feeling becoming more and more intense as line after line was absorbed.

The Federal Magistrate was about to issue an order to turn an underused city facility over to the Department of the Inferior. The facility in mind was the city library. It was to be condemned, demolished, and the ground it stood on devoted to more socially relevant facilities. The librarian was invited to show cause why this order should not be executed. The time limited mentioned was twenty-four hours.

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The judge was an elderly man with distinguished demeanor, but the counsel for the government was a tall, bald, arrogant fellow who smirked at the librarian in open contempt. The judge and the counsel alike had been incredulous when the librarian appeared in court without representation, but there were no library funds available for retaining lawyers. There were not even funds for a qualified exterminator. The librarian had tried to plead on humanitarian grounds that the library was too important to its patrons' mental health to be closed down, even on cultural grounds that the building should be preserved as a relic of the past. But the counsel had smashed his arguments each time; they had no basis in law.

The judge's voice was dry but gentle in answer to the librarian's question. "The suggestion for the demolition originated with the attorneys representing the Snail Darter Society, though that is hardly relevant."

"Your honor, does that mean that the library property will be turned into a ZOO?"

The judge looked slightly embarrassed. "Hardly a zoo, Mr., ah, Director. You know that we are legally obligated to provide a sanctuary for endangered species. Only one type of animal or plant will be housed on the property."

"B-but Your Honor, the library contains the last collection of books on earth. The very last. All the rest have been converted to electronic storage."

The judge looked regretful. He was very old, the librarian thought; perhaps he might remember the joys of real books himself, though he had certainly never patronized the library.

"All those books we've preserved with such love, all those old people who so enjoy using them. It's such a small thing to place the new facility elsewhere, Your Honor. The patrons are so happy, and so little makes them happy these days—"

The counsel broke in stridently. "That is an irrelevant matter, Your Honor. The law is very clear in the necessity of defending the existence of wildlife threatened by our ever-increasing rape of our environment. Our mechanistic worship of blind technology has made us lose all appreciation for life. We all bear collective guilt for the extinction of the passenger pigeon, the moa, and, the, uh, the, uh, mastodon. Can I respectfully request we proceed with this, ah, gentleman's grounds for dismissing the demolition action?"

The judge regarded the librarian sadly. "Sustained. Could you get on with it, please?"

The librarian felt admonished despite himself. No one wanted to be responsible for the eradication of some harmless, furry creature trying to eke out a perilous existence in a concrete-covered world. "Your—Your Honor, can you at least tell me the grounds? I mean, what species—"

"The court was not informed of the species to be sheltered in the new facility after the dedicated staff and elderly patrons are summarily ejected. Perhaps counsel for the government could provide that information?"

The bald man's smirk became a bit less arrogant. But only a bit. "It, uh, has not been finally decided, Your Honor. Either horse leeches or fire ants."

The librarian was stricken speechless for a moment while the judge gazed heavenward. "Couldn't either be placed in some other facility with some other species?"

This time the counsel's voice was smooth. The precedent is United States Vs. New York Public Library, Your Honor. The decision was that the entire facility must be preserved for the organisms responsible for leprosy and a separate but equal facility be established for those producing the Bubonic Plague. If I recall, the library of Harvard University proved adequate."

The judge nodded slowly, then turned to the librarian. "I'm afraid I shall rule against you unless you have any additional arguments to present." There was a clear note of pity in his voice.

"Nothing I've said makes any difference?"

The judge shook his head, glanced sidelong at the government counsel with his superior smile. "I'm afraid that the only grounds recognized for refusing the government's request would be that the proposed site of the wildlife sanctuary already harbors a species on the edge of extinction."

The last librarian heaved a sigh of relief. Everything was going to be all right.

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The librarian took the last of the necessary photographs and pressed the button on the camera that transmitted the image to the national data net. The heavy old volume was closed carefully and respectfully. The librarian had no desire to injure either the brittle binding or its inhabitant, one of the dying race of bookworms.

As the librarian carried the massive Old Testament back into the stacks there was a rhythmic squeaking. It wasn't very loud, but this time the librarian noticed it and stopped. One eye extended downward to look under the smooth plastic chassis, but the sound was unmistakable. The front axle needed new bearings, no doubt about it.

Positions Available

Associate Librarian of Occult Collection of Wicca University. Must be free to work nights (exceptions: President's Day, Flag Day, and Walpurgisnacht) dusk till dawn. Damned good retirement plan. Contact B. L. Zebubb, Avenue of the Choking Mists, Haversack, NJ. Wicca University is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer. No Christians need apply.

Scent Librarian, Miami Zoo. Cataloger needed to classify scents according to new LC system. Three years+ experience with OnLine DataSniff, Novo-Odo, The Nose, or Olfactory InfoBase a must. No weak stomachs. Contact Litter Box 411, Miami, FL

Soap Librarian, Beverly Hills Laundromat & Sauna. High school equivalency a must. No experience necessary. Competitive salary (low six figures). Applicant must be for sure totally awesome. Contact anybody around Beverly Hills.

Library Assistant to Don Giovanni, well-known local businessman and olive oil importer. Fluency in Basic, Cobol, or Sicilian dialects a must. Technical support equipment available, including computer, copier, fax, flak jacket, and .44 Magnum. Applicant should bring books for library. No wimps, please. Leave message with Rocko or Vinnie. Come alone. At night.

Director of Library at the King Ludwig of Bavaria Clinic. Collection includes only paperbacks. Patrons can be moderately eccentric but include many celebrities (Napoleon Bonaparte, Elvis Presley, Charles Manson, Barney Rubble). No deposit-no return policy simplifies checkout procedure.

Reference/Bibliographic Instruction Librarian. Whynot College, a four-year liberal arts college serving right many students in a splendidly bucolic setting, seeks a reference/bibliographic instruction librarian to provide complete reference service 60 hrs/wk; plan and implement a comprehensive BI program including orientation tours and video demonstrations; carry out all interlibrary loans using partial sets of LC NUC volumes; stimulate faculty awareness and promote library utilization, write successful grant proposals, repair and maintain AV equipment, library copier, vacuum cleaner, share shelving responsibilities. Includes non-rotating night and weekend work. ALA-accredited MLS required, PhD preferred. Salary: \$9,200 - \$9,300 depending on qualifications and experience. Write to Joe Bob Willis Dean, Whynot College, Whynot, NC 28703.

Gorge Bush

