Exchange, Ray Bradbury

Exchange

There were too many cards in the file, too many books on the shelves, too many children laughing in the children's room, too many newspapers to fold and stash on the racks ...

All in all, too much. Miss Adams pushed her gray hair back over her lined brow, adjusted her gold-rimmed pince-nez, and rang the small silver bell on the library desk, at the same time switching off and on all the lights. The exodus of adults and children was exhausting.

Miss Ingraham, the assistant librarian, had gone home early because her father was sick, so it left the burden of stamping, filing, and checking books squarely on Miss Adams' shoulders.

Finally the last book was stamped, the last child fed through the great brass doors, the doors locked, and with immense weariness, Miss Adams moved back up through a silence of forty years of books and being keeper of the books, stood for a long moment by the main desk.

She laid her glasses down on the green blotter, and pressed the bridge of her small-boned nose between thumb and forefinger and held it, eyes shut. What a racket! Children who finger-painted or cartooned frontispieces or rattled their roller skates. High school students arriving with laughters, departing with mindless songs!

Taking up her rubber stamp, she probed the files, weeding out errors, her fingers whispering between Dante and Darwin.

A moment later she heard the rapping on the front-door glass and saw a man's shadow outside, wanting in. She shook her head. The figure pleaded silently, making gestures.

Sighing, Miss Adams opened the door, saw a young man in uniform, and said, "It's late. We're closed." She glanced at his insignia and added, "Captain."

"Hold on!" said the captain. "Remember me?"
And repeated it, as she hesitated.
"Remember?"

She studied his face, trying to bring light out of shadow. "Yes, I think I do," she said at last. "You once borrowed books here."
"Right."

"Many years ago," she added. "Now I almost have you placed."
As he stood waiting she tried to see him in those other years, but his younger face did not come clear, or a name with it, and his hand reached out now to take hers.
"May I come in?"

"Well." She hesitated. "Yes."
She led the way up the steps into the immense twilight of books. The young officer looked around and let his breath out slowly, then reached to take a book and hold it to his nose, inhaling, then almost laughing.

"Don't mind me, Miss Adams. You ever smell new books? Binding, pages, print. Like fresh bread when you're hungry." He glanced around. "I'm hungry now, but don't even know what for."
There was a moment of silence, so she asked him how long he might stay.

"Just a few hours. I'm on the train from New York to L.A., so I came up from Chicago to see old places, old friends." His eyes were troubled and he fretted his cap, turning it in his long, slender fingers.

She said gently, "Is anything wrong? Anything I can help you with?"
He glanced out the window at the dark town, with just a few lights in the windows of the small houses across the way.
"I was surprised," he said.

"By what?"
"I don't know what I expected. Pretty damn dumb," he said, looking from her to the windows, "to expect that when I went away, everyone froze in place waiting for me to come home. That when I stepped off the train, all my old pals would unfreeze, run down, meet me at the station. Silly."

"No," she said, more easily now. "I think we all imagine that. I visited Paris as a young girl, went back to France when I was forty, and was outraged that no one had waited, buildings had vanished, and all the hotel staff where I had once lived had died, retired, or traveled."

He nodded at this, but could not seem to go on.
"Did anyone know you were coming?" she asked.
"I wrote a few, but no answers. I figured, hell, they're busy, but they'll be there. They weren't."
She felt the next words come off her lips and was faintly surprised. "I'm still here," she said.

"You are," he said with a quick smile. "And I can't tell you how glad I am."
He was gazing at her now with such intensity that she had to look away.
"You know," she said, "I must confess you look familiar, but I don't quite fit your face with the boy who came here-"

"Twenty years ago! And as for what he looked like, that other one, me, well-"
He brought out a smallish wallet which held a dozen pictures and handed over a photograph of a boy perhaps twelve years old, with an impish smile and wild blond hair, looking as if he might catapult out of the frame.

"Ah, yes." Miss Adams adjusted her pince-nez and closed her eyes to remember. "That one. Spaulding. William Henry Spaulding?"
He nodded and peered at the picture in her hands anxiously.
"Was I a lot of trouble?"

"Yes." She nodded and held the picture closer and glanced up at him.
"A fiend." She handed the picture back. "But I loved you."
"Did you?" he said and smiled more broadly.
"In spite of you, yes."

He waited a moment and then said, "Do you still love me?"
She looked to left and right as if the dark stacks held the answer.
"It's a little early to know, isn't it?"
"Forgive."

"No, no, a good question. Time will tell. Let's not stand like your frozen friends who didn't move. Come along. I've just had some late-night coffee. There may be some left. Give me your cap. Take off that coat. The file index is there. Go look up your old library cards for the hell-heck-of it."

"Are they still there?" In amaze.
"Librarians save everything. You never know who's coming in on the next train. Go."
When she came back with the coffee, he stood staring down into the index file like a bird fixing its gaze on a half-empty nest. He handed her one of the old purple-stamped cards.
"Migawd," he said, "I took out a lot of books."

"Ten at a time. I said no, but you took them. And," she added, "read them! Here." She put his cup on top of the file and waited while he drew out canceled card after card and laughed quietly.

"I can't believe. I must not have lived anywhere else but here. May I take this with me, to sit?" He showed the cards. She nodded. "Can you show me around? I mean, maybe I've forgotten something."

She shook her head and took his elbow. "I doubt that. Come on. Over here, of course, is the adult section."
"I begged you to let me cross over when I was thirteen. 'You're not ready,' you said. But-"

"I let you cross over anyway?"
"You did. And much thanks."
Another thought came to him as he looked down at her.
"You used to be taller than me," he said.

She looked up at him, amused.
"I've noticed that happens quite often in my life, but I can still do this."
Before he could move, she grabbed his chin in her thumb and forefinger and held tight. His eyes rolled.

He said:
"I remember. When I was really bad you'd hold on and put your face down close and scowl. The scowl did it. After ten seconds of your holding my chin very tight, I behaved for days."
She nodded, released his chin. He rubbed it and as they moved on he ducked his head, not looking at her.

"Forgive, I hope you won't be upset, but when I was a boy I used to look up and see you behind your desk, so near but far away, and, how can I say this, I used to think that you were Mrs. God, and that the library was a whole world, and that no matter what part of the world or what people or thing I wanted to see and read, you'd find and give it to me."

He stopped, his face coloring. "You did, too. You had the world ready for me every time I asked. There was always a place I hadn't seen, a country I hadn't visited where you took me. I've never forgotten."
She looked around, slowly, at the thousands of books. She felt her heart move quietly. "Did you really call me what you just said?"

"Mrs. God? Oh, yes. Often. Always."
“Come along," she said at last.

They walked around the rooms together and then downstairs to the newspaper files, and coming back up, he suddenly leaned against the banister, holding tight.

"Miss Adams," he said.

"What is it, Captain?"
He exhaled. "I'm scared. I don't want to leave. I'm afraid."

Her hand, all by itself, took his arm and she finally said, there in the shadows, "Sometimes-I'm afraid, too. What frightens you?"
"I don't want to go away without saying good-bye. If I never return, I want to see all my friends, shake hands, slap them on the back, I don't know, make jokes." He stopped and waited, then went on. "But I walk around town and nobody knows me. Everyone's gone."

The pendulum on the wall clock slid back and forth, shining, with the merest of sounds.

Hardly knowing where she was going, Miss Adams took his arm and guided him up the last steps, away from the marble vaults below, to a final, brightly decorated room, where he glanced around and shook his head.
"There's no one here, either."
"Do you believe that?"

"Well, where are they? Do any of my old pals ever come visit, borrow books, bring them back late?"
"Not often," she said. "But listen. Do you realize Thomas Wolfe was wrong?"

"Wolfe? The great literary beast? Wrong?"
"The title of one of his books."
"You Can't Go Home Again?" he guessed.

"That's it. He was wrong. This is home. Your friends are still here. This was your summer place."
"Yes. Myths. Legends. Mummies. Aztec kings. Wicked sisters who spat toads. Where I really lived. But I don't see my people."
"Well."

And before he could speak, she switched on a green-shaded lamp that shed a private light on a small table.

"Isn't this nice?" she said. "Most libraries today, too much light. There should be shadows, don't you think? Some mystery, yes? So that late nights the beasts can prowl out of the stacks and crouch by this jungle light to turn the pages with their breath. Am I crazy?"

"Not that I noticed."
"Good. Sit. Now that I know who you are, it all comes back."
"It couldn't possibly."
"No? You'll see."

She vanished into the stacks and came out with ten books that she placed upright, their pages a trifle spread so they could stand and he could read the titles.
"The summer of 1930, when you were, what? ten, you read all of these in one week."

"Oz? Dorothy? The Wizard? Oh, yes."
She placed still others nearby. "Alice in Wonderland. Through the Looking-Glass. A month later you reborrowed both. 'But,' I said, 'you've already read them!' 'But,' you said, 'not enough so I can speak. I want to be able to tell them out loud.'

"My God," he said quietly, "did I say that?"
"You did. Here's more you read a dozen times. Greek myths, Roman, Egyptian. Norse myths, Chinese. You were ravenous."

"King Tut arrived from the tomb when I was three. His picture in the Rotogravure started me. What else have you there?"
"Tarzan of the Apes. You borrowed it . .

"Three dozen times! John Carter, Warlord of Mars, four dozen. My God, dear lady, how come you remember all this?"

"You never left. Summertimes you were here when I unlocked the doors. You went home for lunch but sometimes brought sandwiches and sat out by the stone lion at noon. Your father pulled you home by

your ear some nights when you stayed late. How could I forget a boy like that?"

"But still-"
"You never played, never ran out in baseball weather, or football, I imagine. Why?"
He glanced toward the front door. "They were waiting for me."
"They?"

"You know. The ones who never borrowed books, never read. They. Them. Those."
She looked and remembered. "Ah, yes. The bullies. Why did they chase you?"
"Because they knew I loved books and didn't much care for them."
"It's a wonder you survived. I used to watch you getting, reading hunchbacked, late afternoons. You looked so lonely."
"No. I had these. Company."

"Here's more."
She put down Ivanhoe, Robin Hood, and Treasure Island.
"Oh," he said, "and dear and strange Mr. Poe. How I loved his Red Death."

"You took it so often I told you to keep it on permanent loan unless someone else asked. Someone did, six months later, and when you brought it in I could see it was a terrible blow. A few days later I let you have Poe for another year. I don't recall, did you ever-?"

"It's out in California. Shall I-"
"No, no. Please. Well, here are your books. Let me bring others."

She came out not carrying many books but one at a time, as if each one were, indeed, special.

She began to make a circle inside the other Stonehenge circle and as she placed the books, in lonely splendor, he said their names and then the names of the authors who had written them and then the names of

those who had sat across from him so many years ago and read the books quietly or sometimes whispered the finest parts aloud, so beautifully that no one said Quiet or Silence or even Shh!

She placed the first book and there was a wild field of broom and a wind blowing a young woman across that field as it began to snow and someone, far away, called "Kathy" and as the snows fell he saw a girl he had walked to school in the sixth grade seated across the table, her eyes fixed to the windblown field and the snow and the lost woman in another time of winter.

A second book was set in place and a black and beauteous horse raced across a summer field of green and on that horse was another girl, who hid behind the book and dared to pass him notes when he was twelve.

And then there was the far ghost with a snow-maiden face whose hair was a long golden harp played by the summer airs; she who was always sailing to Byzantium where Emperors were drowsed by golden birds that sang in clockwork cages at sunset and dawn.

She who always skirted the outer rim of school and went to swim in the deep lake ten thousand afternoons ago and never came out, so was never found, but suddenly now she made landfall here in the green-shaded light and opened Yeats to at last sail home from Byzantium.

And on her right: John Huff, whose name came clearer than the rest, who claimed to have climbed every tree in town and fallen from none, who had raced through watermelon patches treading melons, never touching earth, to knock down rainfalls of chestnuts with one blow, who yodeled at your sun-up window and wrote the same Mark Twain book report in four different grades before the teachers caught on, at which he said, vanishing, "Just call me Huck."

And to his right, the pale son of the town hotel owner who looked as if he had gone sleepless forever, who swore every empty house was haunted and took you there to prove it, with a juicy tongue,

compressed nose, and throat gargling that sounded the long October demise, the terrible and unutterable fall of the House of Usher.

And next to him was yet another girl.
And next to her ...
And just beyond ...

Miss Adams placed a final book and he recalled the fair creature, long ago, when such things were left unsaid, glancing up at him one day when he was an unknowing twelve and she was a wise thirteen to quietly say: "I am Beauty. And you, are you the Beast?"

Now, late in time, he wanted to answer that small and wondrous ghost: "No. He hides in the stacks and when the clock strikes three, will prowl forth to drink."
And it was finished, all the books were placed, the outer ring of his selves and the inner ring of remembered faces, deathless, with summer and autumn names.

He sat for a long moment and then another long moment and then, one by one, reached for and took all of the books that had been his, and still were, and opened them and read and shut them and took another until he reached the end of the outer circle and then went to touch and turn and find the raft on the river, the field of broom where the storms lived, and the pasture with the black and beauteous horse and its lovely rider. Behind him, he heard the lady librarian quietly back away to leave him with words .

A long while later he sat back, rubbed his yes, and looked around at the fortress, the encirclement, the Roman encampment of books, and nodded, his eyes wet.
"Yes."
He heard her move behind him.
"Yes, what?"

"What you said, Thomas Wolfe, the title of that book of his. Wrong. Everything's here. Nothing's changed."

"Nothing will as long as I can help it,,, she said.
"Don't ever go away."

"I won't if you'll come back more often."
Just then, from below the town, not so very far off, a train whistle blew.
She said:
"Is that yours?"

"No, but the one soon after," he said and got up and moved around the small monuments that stood very tall and one by one, shut the covers, his lips moving to sound the old titles and the old, dear names.

"Do we have to put them back on the shelves?" he said. She looked at him and at the double circle and after a long moment said, "Tomorrow will do. Why?"

"Maybe," he said, "during the night, because of the color of those lamps, green, the jungle, maybe those creatures you mentioned will come out and turn the pages with their breath. And maybe-"

"What else?"
"Maybe my friends, who've hid in the stacks all these years, will come out, too.',
"They're already here," she said quietly.
"Yes." He nodded. "They are."
And still he could not move.

She backed off across the room without making any sound, and when she reached her desk she called back, the last call of the night.
"Closing time. Closing time, children."

And turned the lights quickly off and then on and then halfway between; a library twilight.
He moved from the table with the double circle of books and came to her and said, "I Can go now."

"Yes," she said. "William Henry Spaulding. You can." They walked together as she turned out the lights, turned out the lights, one by one. She helped him into his coat and
then, hardly thinking to do so, he took her hand and kissed her fingers.

It was so abrupt, she almost laughed, but then she said, "Remember what Edith Whanon said when Henry James did what you just did?"
"What?"

'The flavor starts at the elbow.'
They broke into laughter together and he turned and went down the marble steps toward the stained-glass entry. At the bottom of the stairs he looked up at her and said:
"Tonight, when you're going to sleep, remember what I called you when I was twelve, and say it out loud."

"I don't remember," she said.
"Yes, you do."
Below the town, a train whistle blew again.

He opened the front door, stepped out, and he was gone. Her hand on the last light switch, looking in at the double circle of books on the far table, she thought: What was it he called me?
"Oh, yes," she said a moment later.

And switched off the light.

The end