

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

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Bookstore

It's Thursday evening. I inquire about the availability of a new release.

"Sorry, Man. Doesn't look like we'll have that in stock till next week." The clerk behind the register is scrawny and short, face ruthlessly pitted with deep acne scars.

I envy him.

"OK, what about this one?" I slide a second Post-it across the counter.

He squints, trying to decipher my chicken scrawl. I painstakingly recorded the title from a book review my wife, Ashley, forgot on our coffee table.

He smiles, hops off his stool, and chirps, "Follow me!"

I'm led to the poetry section. I can discern that much. Some memories are calcified. Reliable even now.

He plucks a slim volume off the shelf.

"Is there anything else I can help you with, Sir?"

"No," I reply. "Thank you."

He trots off.

It's a fancy hardcover with a fabric jacket sewn on and embroidered artwork. I can't just flip it over and clock the price—numbers have mostly abandoned me, too—but figure it's pricey.

My Adam's apple pumps hard one time.

Ashley will be disappointed. My lack of income has strained our finances. What's more, she finds the entire exercise counterproductive, clinging to the past rather than focusing on what's left of my future.

*You should really see a therapist, Sweetheart. This isn't healthy anymore.*

It's become a refrain of hers, to which I respond by digging my heels in and buying more books.

She doesn't get it. How could anyone understand what it's like to be shorn of their faculties? To witness their identity crumble and horizons collapse?

To be thirty-two with dementia?

They can't.

So why should I surrender the few activities that still make me feel like myself?

I won't.

I tuck the handsome book under my arm and head to the register.

"Excuse me. Do you have anything by Kerouac or Dostoyevsky?" I can still recall facts and names from my previous, literate life.

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For a split second, the worker's head slightly lists. His face is painted with befuddlement.

"Yeah, of course!" he snaps himself out of it. "Fiction section, under K and D."

I stare at him, having suddenly forgotten what we were talking about.

He blinks.

I blink.

Blink-blink.

He breaks it, "Oh, you want me to show you?"

I nod, remembering that is indeed what I wanted.

He climbs off the stool again and guides me to the fiction department.

"Here ya' go." He gestures to a harrowing tunnel of packed bookshelves.

My pulse throbs in my neck. I need more than just a general direction.

He stands there, waiting for any other questions.

I can't expose my fraudulence, so I say, "Thanks!"

As he returns to his station, I feverishly run my index finger along the spines of books as if I can even read their titles.

This will do for now.

I get to linger, thumbing pages and pretending to scan synopses. Sniffing the expensive paper and adhesive. Suddenly, I am in college again, nestled in my favorite corner of the library, revelations and enlightenment coming to me through a worn copy of *Dharma Bums* while Ashley studies nearby. Then it's further back, my teenage bedroom late one night, the unnamed narrator in *Notes from Underground* changing my life with deft exhortations to question everything about myself and society.

Fleeting, I am *me* again.

I have no idea how much time passes because that requires a functioning frontotemporal lobe. Mine is sickly. Withered and ever shrinking.

"Bukowski, huh?" comes a voice.

I start and fumble the books I'm holding.

"Oh, sorry. Just noticed you'd been going through his catalog. Not exactly Dostoyevsky," the clerk says with a wink.

"HA-HA!" Nerves launch the sounds out of my throat at an inappropriate clip and decibel.

Now he's startled.

"Um, anyway, Sir, we're closing soon, is there anything else I can do for you?"

I look around. There are no other patrons. No one left but me and the diminutive, rubble-cheeked employee.

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Of course I hadn't noticed.

"Maybe you wanted some Kerouac?"

I consider it. How Ashley will react if I come back to the apartment freighted with more costly books that I'll never read.

That I *can't* read.

"Yes, *Dharma Bums*, please," I respond, wincing at my poor decision but proud of the seeming literacy I demonstrate.

He strides down the aisle, pulls a copy, brings it to me.

"That it?"

I want to say yes. I try to will it.

I can't.

The old me could never leave sans an armload.

"No. I'd also like the combined edition of *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from Underground*."

He shuffles a few steps sideways and retrieves the requested item.

"That will be all. Thank you," I say, before he can lure me into another errant purchase.

He sends me off with a complimentary satchel and stack of bookmarks.

On the sidewalk, the pouch's strap digs into my shoulder and I think about Ashley again. She will have her reaction, no doubt. I hate to put her in uncomfortable positions. She means well. But, right now, in this very moment, I am a young man with a healthy brain and a facility for reading. I can sense the words dancing just behind their fine covers, beckoning. I eagerly anticipate them.

And I am not jealous of the puny clerk with the ruined face.