

The Crazy Woman in the Bookstore

by Con Chapman

They had gone to the bookstore after dinner. It was too late to go to a movie; the only one they'd agreed on was two towns away, and at dinner she'd said she wasn't up for it.

They went off in different directions when they got there, she with a purpose, he uncharacteristically ambling around. At one point their paths crossed at the end of an aisle.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked him.



"Oh—that? I tracked it down at the library this afternoon."

"Well, why did we come here then?"

"Something to do—you're looking for something, right?"

"Yes, but I don't have to have it tonight. I've got a book for now."

"That's okay. Just killing time," and with that she headed down the aisle, found the author she was looking for and began to examine her books. He rounded the corner and his eye caught the brightly-colored spine of a novel by a publisher who'd turned his work down.



"A punk-Muslim manifesto!" a back cover blurb screamed. Probably was a waste of time to send it to them, he thought.

He made his way out to the open floor where the coffee table books were stacked; nothing of interest to him, so he raised his gaze to the room as a whole instead of looking down at the covers.

His eye caught a woman in a white ski jacket, around his age, her eyes wide open as if startled. She had a look of determination on her face and a book in her hand, and her eyes caught his as she moved purposefully towards him.

He averted his gaze, a bit put off by the intensity of the woman's aspect, then turned back to look at her again. She was almost upon him now and staring straight at him as she said "Fucking CIA!" under her breath. He couldn't help but glance at her as she went past, then he turned to see if she would continue on her path or confront him. He watched as she strode swiftly towards the back of the store, not saying a word to anyone else.



He turned and, as unobtrusively as he could, looped back in the direction from which he had come, but the woman had disappeared from sight. He rounded the rows of racks to see if she was there, but there was nothing to see but the usual browsers, some absorbed in books, others looking for something they hadn't found yet.

He came up beside his wife and said in a voice just above a whisper "There's a crazy woman in the store—for some reason she's irritated at me."

"How do you know she's crazy? Seems to me that's a perfectly rational reaction," she said without looking up at first, but then glancing at him with a sly smile.

"I'm not kidding," he said, this time with an urgent emphasis.

"I'm not going to run out of the store just because there's a crazy person in it. I'll be done in a minute," she said, turning back to the book she was looking through.

He exhaled, a little exasperated. "I'm thinking of you, too."

"Tell one of the people who work here."

"As if that would do any good. They're a bunch of English majors. They'll probably be looking up the proper procedure in the company handbook while she's slashing kids in the children's section."

"I said I'd be just a minute," she said as she replaced a book on the shelf and pulled another off.

He didn't think the woman was anything who couldn't be handled, but she definitely was crazy and not the kind of harmlessly weird person you usually saw in a bookstore, the ones who spent all day in the comfortable chairs reading graphic novels or big picture books. She was paranoid, probably schizophrenic; he'd learned long ago to treat her kind like a tornado, and walk swiftly away. A crazy guy had come out of a downtown alley at him many years ago and thrown stuff at him for no reason at all. Another time a guy'd thrown a punch at him, and there was the guy who'd been stabbed for no reason at all on Comm Ave. Better safe than sorry, he thought.



He thought back to another time that a woman had refused his gesture of chivalry; he'd gone swimming on the Esplanade while his girlfriend had stayed outside the fence to do yoga—right out in the open, as if she was at a spa or something. He saw her get up into a headstand, and when he'd completed a lap and come back there was a guy sitting next to her, smoking a cigarette, trying to chat her up.

He got out and went up to the fence and said “Do you want me to come out?” to her, but she just said “I can handle it”—didn't even open her eyes.

“She's cool,” the guy said and then took a drag on his cigarette.

“I'll be out in a minute,” he had said, then glared at the guy for a moment, but he was more angry with his girlfriend, that she'd do something as stupid as yoga in an area where there were pretty tough bars right across Storror Drive, a jail further down and people whizzing by on roller skates and bikes. That she'd make a point of not accepting his help, of acting as if her highly-developed psychic powers could repel unwanted advances, like the guy who claimed he could bend metal spoons with his brain waves. That was just like her, he remembered, and one of the reasons he'd eventually broken up with her.



He made one more loop around the floor, saw nothing amiss, and stopped at the end of the aisle where his wife was still standing, trying to decide which book to buy.

"I'm ready," she said as she replaced one title and stuck another under her arm. "Did they throw your girl friend in the loony bin?"

"Next time I sense you might be in danger when we're out, I'll go home and leave a note on the refrigerator."

She tsked at him. "Don't be that way. I never know when you're kidding."

"I think I made it pretty clear I wasn't."

"Still—I can't imagine someone going nuts in a bookstore."

As they walked through the line he continued to scan the store for the woman. He considered telling the person at the register about her, but figured he'd done enough to save an indifferent world that evening.

