

George, Love, Shakespeare and Company

by Helen Yung

I was installing myself into life at the bookstore. Mornings, I woke up, helped open the store, carried books outside, re-shelved items that had been moved after closing to make room for our beds. Thereafter I went to the public baths on Ile St-Louis or by the Centre Pompidou to shower and brush my teeth.

Some days I tried to not bathe, be more *bohème* so as to avoid having to hoist my affairs some twenty blocks over. But the bookstore was too dusty, Paris too dirty, me too bourgeois to let personal hygiene go slack. In any event, it was easy enough to think of the morning walk as a daily pilgrimage, a ritual, a beautiful way of making the cityscape my home.

The route from bookstore, across the Seine, past Notre-Dame, through the busy centre of Paris, kitty corner to the marvelous Pompidou, or, along the Seine, past Notre-Dame, several cobblestone streets east, turning by the phallic-looking monument on the bridge, across to Ile St-Louis — either route to either one of the nearby public facilities... What a way to make from bed to bath. Even when the novelty wore thin I *liked* feeling weary of having to duck past *those* awkward tourists gawking at Parisian delights to perform *my* banal morning rituals.

When I indicated earlier, “Mornings, I woke up” I meant - in the mornings when 90-year old George would wake everyone up by ferociously banging a kitchen utensil against a cheap metal pot or pan. White-haired and withered, he would slowly plod forth from his apartment two stories above the bookstore, clanking rise and shine, down the stairs to the library where most of us slept, aggressively beating a steady racket in your face somehow with his unsteady,

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shaking hands until you showed signs of life (protest), before moving on to the ground floor where there were still the Art and Russian sections to rouse and awaken.

I asked Becca, the strawberry blonde from England, why George was waking us up earlier each day. Just Tuesday we were still waking at noon. This was Friday, three days later, and he had had us up by nine. "I don't know," she said in her arch accented voice, "it might have to do with Easter. There are more tourists in the city. He wants to open earlier, what do you think?"

After opening, everyone would scatter and make themselves scarce. After my shower I would find the others picnicking in the parkette next door or at the Luxembourg gardens. By and by someone would ask "who's at the store?" and we would look at each other blankly. "Is anyone helping George?"

Someone *would* stumble back. It was our duty. The only rules for staying at the bookstore were that one had to write, one had to read, and one had to help with the store.

When you did try to help, George would either tell you "there's nothing to do, sit there" or "go outside, get out in the sun, fall in love," or he would walk you over to, say, the Russian Literature section, sweep his hand over the bookcases and say "organize this."

Naturally, while you stood obediently in your corner re-alphabetizing, tourists and their children would reach around you with their dirty hands and unalphabetize as you went. One might as well have rolled a large stone to the top of a great hill, all the while knowing that when you reach the top you would be obliged to let go and let the stone roll back down, at which time your work would commence again. Noble Sisyphus.

The funny thing was that after a time, I found myself *wanting* to organize sections, like a pious child learning to soothe an older person's temper; what's more, I was not alone in this change of heart — the shelves began to appear consistently tidy, worked over already by some other new leaf-turned associate.

Wherever the bookstore crowd gathered there was wine and chocolate. Usually there were cigarettes. When they ran out of

money it was loose tobacco. I don't remember what we used to talk about. After a few weeks, one of the bookstore dwellers, Timo, asked me "have you ever noticed that these writer kids, they never talk about books?" Timo was a bit of a con, or so he liked to encourage you to think. He liked being clever, liked finding ways of outsmarting the system, any system. The rest of the bookstore crowd, led by a few old-timers, didn't take him seriously because he wasn't bohemian, because he really was "down and out" and not by choice, because he *was* looking for a job as a salesman, perhaps also because he didn't just sit around and drink.

By this time I had begun to make a bit of money from working at a local bar. I was working nights. Naturally I tried to sleep during the day; naturally this was difficult at the bookstore. There was a hidden cot where one could wiggle in and sleep undetected (if one didn't snore) even while the public milled about thumbing through books. But it was too warm — I tried several times, and woke up without fail, covered in sweat, parched, and then *unable to wiggle out* because there were children and their disapproving parents playing below — so I took to leaving the city on my days off in search of cheap hostels, first, in small sleepy Northern towns, later, free beaches on the French Riviera. It *was* fun. *Not* conducive to writing.

Once I came back from the coast and Becca asked me where I had been. "We were worried. No one knew where you were."

When I saw Timo next I told him the Shakespeare kids weren't so bad after all.

"They could have called you."

"I don't think they have my cellphone number."

"I do."

When I saw Becca later I mentioned that the next time, if she were worried about me, she could ask Seppo for my number. She shrugged. "We were looking for you because George was asking for you."

"For me?" That was unexpected. "What did he want?"

"I don't know," said Becca, shrugging again.

When I found George he barked at me as usual. "Where have you been? We've got lots of work to do!" I asked if he wanted me to reorganize the Literature section. "No! Someone else can do that! You have a book to write!

A book! Me. A book! "OK," I said meekly.

"Sit down!"

I sat down and wondered if he was going to lock me up like they did to Colette until she produced work.

"Here, you see? We have all these papers to organize," said George, shoving letters of all shapes, sizes, and stationery in my direction. "This is an article someone wrote about me. We'll keep that. This one, he's asking for a room, we'll have to throw this out. It's no good, these letters. Every day someone writes asking if they can stay here. But we've got too many people! *Too many*. We've got to organize these papers."

I skimmed through a few letters while George continued to comment on the state of the bookstore community and its global following. "How do you want me to organize these?"

"How? How! We're going to write a book! A history of the bookstore! You're going to help me!

"Oh."

"You've been looking for a job, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Have you found one?"

"Yes."

"Doing what? Where?"

"At a bar. Just around the corner."

"You work every day?"

"No, just Fridays and Saturdays."

"Just weekends. So every day after you wake up, you come up here and we'll work! Starting at nine o'clock!"

I pointed out that I didn't get off on weekends until six in the morning. "I could come up at nine but I don't function very well--"

"--what time did you say?"

"Six o'clock."

"Alright then, you come up at noon! Six hours. That's plenty. You come up at noon and we'll work."

I nodded and went back to reading the papers he had set in front of me.

"No no, not now! We're all done for today. You've tired me out. Tomorrow. You come back tomorrow at noon!"

I went back the next day. And the day after. On the third day, I was sitting in a sea of marginalia when in walked Jay. A lanky sort of fellow, Jay looked somewhere between thirty-five and fifty-five. You just couldn't tell. Once I asked if he was a writer and he laughed, said no. *He* and George were just old friends, he said. Meaning: *I* don't have to be a writer to stay *here*.

I never thought to ask George about Jay.

"Oh hi.," Jay said. "Don't mind me. I'm just pretending to look for George's poem."

"Yes," I said, wondering if I had heard right, "he was in here earlier looking for it too. He said it was a love poem."

Jay shook his head and grimaced.

"I wanted to laugh when he said that," I told Jay, "but he looked so sad. Like he'd lost the most precious thing in the world."

"Yes," sighed Jay, "I know."

"I hope you find it."

"Oh no," he said, casting an eye at the door. "I saw it yesterday. I read it and I tore it up and threw it in the garbage."

"You what?" He nodded. I could barely repeat the words. "You threw it in the garbage?"

"It was terrible!"

"But it was his poem!"

"I *know* but it was *terrible*."

"But it was his poem! And a *love* poem to boot!"

"Yes, and it was just awful. Awful I tell you. He wanted to give it to Marsha." He made another face. "It's far better that I threw it out." Jay shivered. "It was embarrassing."

Marsha! Censorship! Usurpery!

"Anyway, don't tell him," said Jay. I nodded, not understanding. I went back to reading another hand-scrawled letter. "What are you doing there?"

"George told me to organize these papers."

"Oh," he snickered and smirked. "For the book?"

"Yes."

"Oh don't take him seriously."

"No?"

"No," said Jay, rolling his eyes. "He's been saying he's going to write this book for ages."

"Oh," I said. "Well, there's a lot of interesting stuff here. It does seem worth doing, in my opinion. I think a lot of people would be interested in the history of the bookstore."

"Ha."

I really did not know what else to say. I looked back down at the letter that I had been reading.

"No no, I - am - serious! Stop!" Lowering his voice again, Jay went on. "You really think you're organizing anything here? It's a game. You put the papers into little piles and he comes back at the end of the day to push all the papers into one big pile and back it goes into the box. You'll never get anywhere."

"Well," I said looking around me, "I can't just leave all this here. George will come back and yell at me."

"Oh just *go*. I'm sure you've got somewhere else to be. I'll take care of this. I'll tell him."

"I think I'll just finish reading this one."

"Do whatever you want." With *that*, Jay turned and walked out.

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Truth, speculative gossip, fictions, what have you...

Jay was in love with George whom he was trying to lure away on a road trip across the Maritimes in Canada, but couldn't so long as book-writing and lyric compositions stood in the way. Meanwhile George was in love with Marsha whom he had lured to Paris from Maine, U.S. of A. under the pretense of needing her to pen "a history of the bookstore."

I was only bait. Marsha had confessed her (psychic, she said) attraction to me, a week or two earlier; George must have somehow found out. But that didn't matter in the end because the Tuesday after the poem incident, she went and kissed one of the American boys who confessed afterwards to me that he really liked Marsha and that he hoped her liking boys now (or kissing him) wasn't just an experiment. Subsequently, George stopped nagging me to organize papers and switched me on to wrapping books in protective plastic.

Love, against the dying of the light.

