

Becoming Them

It's my fault. Despite a my degree in Eastern European folklore, I invited them in.
What was I thinking?
My neighbors would say I wasn't.

I was considering where all this actually began this evening as I sat beneath the bright lights of the makeshift operating theater that once was my den. And though there are many points in the story that I could label as the one that brought me here, I focused on that damn anatomy book as the real culprit.

Sure I'd seen her around before. Who could miss her in a town this small? It was like having a Hollywood starlit drop out of heaven into a small New England farm town. Hell, that's exactly what it was. There wasn't a man in town that didn't see her once and spend the rest of the week ruminating over the experience, making excuses in order to run back into town on errands. I myself began parking the car at the far end of town and walking to my appointments in order to cover more ground for a chance encounter with her. But we're mostly farmers here or the sons of farmers (as I am). With the acceptance of a brush with the county dairy princess, we aren't familiar with the tight chest stomach flip one experiences meeting such an exotic woman.

We are struck dumb.

But I am fortunate in that I have a love of texts. Bibliophile that I am, I cannot turn away from an open bookstore or avoid library fundraisers. To the dismay of my ex-wife, I am a book collector. This of course means that I am also a rescuer of books. If I am dropping off a crate of #2 plastic or clear glass bottles at the recycling center and I happen to see a load of books being thrown away, I will rescue them and bring them

home. There is a bookcase in every room of my little house overflowing with biographies, aged textbooks, world histories, airport novels, and their brethren.

It was during one of these recycling adventures, thirteen short weeks after my wife had signed the papers divorcing me for, among other things, just such behavior, that I spied Grey's Anatomy leaning against the center's office door.

It's a brilliant piece of work. The book defines the human anatomy and illustrates its systems with extraordinary detail. Each element separated and inspected from several angles. No surgeon is unfamiliar with this text. It disassembles a human being in a way that only actual dissection can out do. But while it is a work of genius and a part of any medical education, it does not explore and explain the human mind. No textbook ever has.

And that is what I was thinking as I approached the book with a feeling one normally reserves for a stray pure bred hound pup discovered in one's back field. I was just going to pick the book up when an elegant hand reached down and grabbed it.

How I had missed her is a mystery.

Where had she come from? And why did she want my book?

"Grey's Anatomy," she whispered. "Wow." Then she looked up and caught me with her gaze.

"This yours?"

I was trapped. I needed to speak, but I had suddenly been thrown from my single-minded purpose of picking up the treasured book to looking into the eyes of the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

She truly was exotic. Wearing what we used to call hippie clothes, she reminded me of those window displays at a mall that make older folks agitated and turn younger folks into consumers. She wore faded bell-bottom jeans so tight that they were seemingly applied rather than slipped on. Her cowboy boots were made of the same brown suede as the tassel covered belt that hung just below the waste band of her pants, which in turn hung just below her bare midriff. Yet though distracting they didn't compare to her eyes. It was her eyes that captured me.

Cool blue orbs in almond shaped settings on a dark Middle Eastern face, they held my gaze and read past my own eyes into my very thoughts. This, of course, was fine with me. It kept me from having to find something to say.

Before I knew it, she had smiled and said something that set me at ease. Within moments we were discussing our mutual love of books while I walked her back to her car. Afterwards, as I returned to my own vehicle, I looked down at the book in my hands – how it had got there, I don't recall – and read the note scrawled across its dust jacket.

Terra - 692-0945
Can't wait to see your collection
I'll bring the wine
See you at 8

As I drove out of the recycling center's gate I noticed that Jerry Stevens, the center's administrator was outside his office with several customers. They were not talking, or hard at work sorting glass and paper into clearly labeled bins, as I would have expected. They were just staring at me, or my car, or something behind me. I wasn't really sure what they were looking at. I realized for the first time in the thirty-two years I had lived in my hometown what it felt like to be a stranger.

And I kind of liked it.

There isn't a lot I can say about small towns that hasn't already been said. Picture your idea of a small town, and I bet it's pretty much exactly what I grew up in. The general store, the post office, the one stoplight, the sleepy sheriff and the single pump gas station all describe what I know as home. What folks don't often think of about small towns is the love hate relationship their residents have with the unfamiliar.

There is not a small town in the world that doesn't experience it. In such a community, there is safety in familiarity. Sure some kid might drive by your house with his friends in the middle of the night and play baseball with your mailbox, but the culprits always get found out. Someone sees the bat, notices the circle of destruction begins and ends at a home with a newly licensed driver, it always gets found out, believe me. Everybody knows everybody, monitors what they're doing in a homey grandparently form of familiarity, and looks out for one another. A new element comes into the mix, and

there's a reaction to it. Dale Stewart's mohawk, Susan Hutchins' cyber coffee shop, the sudden appearance of a starlit in our midst, the self serve gas pump at Kip's station; these were all greeted with suspicion at first, but the same energy that riled us up, also energized us. It got us talking about something new.

It got us thinking outside the box.

But there is definitely an "Us" and "Them" mentality that comes with living in a small town. And when Terra Sinett came over for dinner to my home in Russet, Vermont (pop. 1,538), I crossed over a line that is often invisible but never truly alterable.

I got involved with Them, and left behind my existence with the Us forever.

So she came over that night with not one, but two bottles of South American Merlot, a 35mm camera, and the most amazing smile I have ever seen. We talked about everything I had been reading for the last twenty years. Things that no one else in Russet ever cared to talk about. Things that I had in fact learned years ago were not polite conversation in a town where the water tower and milk prices were mainstays of conversation, and school taxes were what you spoke about when you wanted to argue.

By the end of the night we had made plans for Terra to bring some of her friends up from the city to "hang out," and I suddenly felt as if my dreams of being a professor weren't so crazy after all. I don't remember what I said, but she listened...not just politely, but proactively. Spurring me on with questions and ideas to ramble amid a sea of associations and tributary concepts. I was thinking out loud, and she was soaking it all up, interjecting with other points of view, and coming back for more.

It was intellectual love making at its best. Her departure resembled interruption more than conclusion. We actually spent an hour saying goodbye, her slowly climbing into her Jeep Cherokee, me standing on the threshold of my saltbox-cottage-library-home, the two of us riffing on old films and mythology. When finally she pulled away I felt exhausted, and stimulated, and lonely for the first time since my wife had walked out nearly three years before.

That's how it started. Suddenly I wasn't the old me anymore. I was liberated and venerated in the same instant. Terra brought her friends and with them came their

equipment. One of her friends decided that they wanted to document it all. I'm embarrassed to say that I don't know which of her friends it was since Terra made all the arrangements and I only really talked with her about it. But they decided that they wanted to film me in my home talking about my ideas.

To pay me to talk about my ideas on film.

It was dream-like. This gorgeous young woman, these heady discussions, the comfort and safety of my own home, and someone wanted to pay me for the privilege. I was thoroughly willing to go along with the operation.

I invited them in.

My den became the operating theater of my mind. Lights and cameras; audio microphones and technicians, all stirring at the edge of a halo of light which surrounded Terra and me. Like some protective womb or an intellectual spaceship, it carried us on flights of fancy powered by ideas.

It went on for weeks.

I think perhaps we stopped to eat occasionally, but I'm not really sure. We may have even slept once and awhile.

I do know that I never went back into town. Someone else was taking care of things for me so that I could think out loud.

It was marvelous.

And then the other night as I sat in our electronic womb light I stopped short in the middle of a sentence I had obviously already spoken. Terra stared at or through me with an unreadable expression. It was as if the machinery that surrounded me slowed slightly and dropped in pitch. Things were obviously winding down, and I was only just becoming aware of it.

I was running out of things to say. The thoughts that had once come streaming out of my head were now moving much more slowly. I tried to think back to when this might have begun but instead began outlining that which I have told you here. My mind went back to the book.

I look back on the weeks I have spent with Terra and it is as if all this was a fabrication of something by someone in order to create some kind of explanation, of what I'm not sure, and I was the fuel cell for the process.

This evening we broke for the night. The lights went down, although I don't think they were nearly as bright tonight as they were the night before, the technicians disappeared, Terra kissed me on the cheek and said she would be back in the morning to resume, but the equipment had been packed away. I'm not sure that has ever happened before.

I really can't recall.

I went in to my kitchen and didn't recognize a thing. I desperately wanted a cup of herbal tea, but couldn't find the ingredients. Nor could I remember how one goes about preparing a cup of tea. I felt wasted, exhausted, and very, very old.

So I wandered around the house trying to find a place to lie down and sleep, but after a while I gave up and just sat back down in the same chair that I've been sitting in for weeks and closed my eyes.

I'm not sure if I am asleep right now.

But I know I'm not dreaming.

~Rees Shad