

Provenance

I

It's stupid to be afraid of books, isn't it?

Or maybe not. You could argue that there are people out there who are afraid of the ideas in books, like Communism or sex or profanity. But I'm not talking about that kind of fear. I'm afraid of the objects themselves. Well, that's not quite true; I don't want you to think that I'm saying that I have a phobia of books. I don't like to touch them. Really, really don't like to touch them. I'm okay with new books, straight from the printers, still smelling of ink and glue and wood pulp. It's the old books that I fear, the ones that have been passed from owner to owner, lost and found and lost again. I fear tattered and worn books.

Then why did I become a librarian, a cataloger, who has to touch them everyday? To be honest, I just fell into it, like a lot of other people in the library who didn't do anything else with their English degrees. You know us, the ones who don't want to teach but aren't talented enough to be novelists. We're the ones who experimented with poetry in our teens but stopped once we got out of puberty. It was either this or food service. Perish the thought. So, I went for a Masters of Library Science degree down at the University of Washington and gotten a job here at Augusta University shortly after I graduated. I was lucky enough to have lived in Washington all my life.

That Monday afternoon, my desk was, as usual, surrounded by carts of theses, dissertations, and new books. There was a cart of donated books in Chinese that were waiting for someone who could read the language to tell me what the titles were. It looked like I'd build a barricade around my desk. I had a narrow gap between the carts and the tables that I thought of as my escape hatch. I sat at my desk, hands in my lap, eying a pile of battered old books on the low shelves that marked the border between my area and Julia's, one of the other catalogers.

Josh the mail boy had dropped the books off that morning, and had let me know that Special Collections wanted them as soon as I could get them into the catalog. Urgent, ASAP, etc. etc. I could have said told them that the dissertations had priority over Special Collections items, but to be honest I just wanted to get them out of my area and off my docket. I had procrastinated long enough. As surreptitiously as I could, I pulled a pair of thin leather gloves out of my backpack and slipped them onto my hands, tugging the light brown leather down over my fingers. I took the three leather bound books down slowly, almost not breathing in case I dropped them. They looked like they would crumble

to dust and flakes of leather if you held them too tightly. Early 1700s? Older? I set the pile down on a small patch of open space, and gingerly opened the cover of the first book.

Faint brown scrawls covered the verso page, too faint to read. Elegant cursive script spilled down half of the page, ending with a flourishing signature that I couldn't make out. I turned the pages. No publication data, no colophon, but that wasn't a big surprise. I turned a few more pages. No title, no publisher, no date. Then I thought, maybe I would luck out. Maybe this was a diary and I could pass it right on to the Special Collections staff and let them deal with it. The happy thought evaporated when I saw the first page of text; typeset characters marched across the page, neat and orderly. I flipped back a few pages and saw a tell-tale jagged ridge of paper sticking up from the gutter of the book. The title page had been torn out and lost. Shit. I spent a few more minutes with the book, casting back and forth through the pages to see if I could scrounge up any details about its origins. Nothing, not even old library stamps or a printer's mark.

I turned back to the inside cover and squinted at the handwritten note. Finally, I spotted a date: 1799. Curious, this little guy must have had a hard life if it looked a hundred or more years older than it really was. I held the book as close to my nose as I dared and squinted some more, but couldn't make out any details. Signed by Matthew? Matthias? Last name started with an S? I sighed, set the book down, and used my PC to call up the national library catalog, OCLC, and started banging away at the advanced search options, trying to get a fix on the book's origins.

It took me the rest of the day to figure out where the triplets had come from. My eyes stung from looking through the dozens of possibilities that had come up on the screen. I was *pretty* sure that I had found the right records. If they had a problem with my records downstairs, they could get in there and fix them themselves. The trio of books were officially in our system. Their assigned call numbers were printed on acid-free cards and stuck carefully between the pages. I shoved a few carts out of the way, snatched up the books, and headed down to Archives. I hoped that I would find someone down there. They kept bankers hours, and it was getting close to five.

Special Collections was tucked into the basement of our library, where there weren't any windows to let in UV light. Plants were banned from the area for fear of bugs, and the temperature was always just below what was comfortable for people. The books housed in this collection ranged from eighth century Buddhist bamboo books that we couldn't translate to Enlightenment-era scientific treatises to artist's books. And, as usual, the Archives were dead. Apart from the assistant librarian, no one was there. The books and documents on the shelves were undisturbed and tidy in their rows. They were only here because someone, someday, might possibly see a use for them. They would stay on the

shelves until they disintegrated.

“Audrey? I have your books for you. Where do you want them?” I asked, moving to put the books on the tall, wide counter that protected the assistant librarian from imaginary hordes of scholars with oily fingers and sodas with leaky lids.

The brunette looked up from her computer screen and aimed her glasses in my direction. “What?” she asked intelligently.

I lifted the books so that she could get a better look at the worn brown covers. “*Journeys in Silesia*, Emory Brown, 1799. Clarke's *Hagiography of Hell*, 1805. Barlett's *Muskovy Travels*, 1794. All cataloged and ready to go.”

Audrey blinked at me. “Those aren't ours. We don't do travel books. And we certainly don't do demonology. Where'd they come from?”

“Josh said they were for Special Collections.”

“That's all?”

“Yup. Look, can I put them down? They're kind of heavy.”

Audrey shrugged and reached for the phone. Her finger punched four numbers in rapid succession. “Josh?” A pause. “Well, what time did he leave?”

I put the books on the counter and turned to go, but I didn't get far before Audrey called, “Wait, Ada! The mail room kid says that the package was addressed to Bruce Jasper, not us. Can you run them down to his office?”

“I don't know where that is.”

Audrey rolled her eyes at me. “Back out the way you came, down the hall. It's labeled. Oh, and you might have to knock a couple of times. Dr. Jasper is getting a little deaf.”

“Jasper's got a doctorate?” News to me.

“Yeah.”

“What in?”

“I don't know. I never asked,” Audrey said, turning back to her computer. Her mouse pointer zoomed around the screen as she set about shutting it down.

Holding the books in my still-gloved hands, I headed for Dr. Jasper's office. It turned out to be a lot farther down the hallway than Audrey had indicated. I tucked the triplets under my arm and knocked soundly on a door marked B. Jasper in peeling black letters. The door opened almost immediately, but, instead of an aging librarian, a young face appeared. A young handsome face, no less. His green eyes were dark and wide, over a long, elegant nose. He had cropped black hair sticking out all over his head,

and his chin was dotted with thick stubble. He looked just like any other grad student at the end of term: stressed out and wired from too little sleep and too much caffeine. I gave him my best approximation of a “hang in there” smile.

The student made a gentlemanly effort as he swept the door open and let me pass into the cluttered office. Like most faculty offices on campus, you could barely see what color the walls were for the bookshelves that leaned against the paint. Books, papers, and notebooks were crammed onto the wooden shelves. Maps or rolled up drawings jutted out here and there. Where Jasper had run out of room on the shelves, things were stacked in ragged piles on the floor. There were even drawers from the old card catalog jumbled together on the thin brown carpet. Jasper's desk was near the back of the room, naturally piled high with papers and other academic detritus. There was just enough room between it and the shelves to squeeze a pair of legs through. The librarian himself was behind the desk, rummaging through battered notebooks. He didn't hear me come in. His bald, freckled scalp reflected the florescent lights, and his fringe of gray hair looked was a pale halo. The man needed a hair cut. As it was, he was right on the border between kindly prof and mad scientist.

“Dr. Jasper?” Nothing. A little louder. “Dr. Jasper?”

The student took pity on me and oozed his way around the desk and set a hand on Jasper's shoulder. The librarian's craggy face glanced up and his brown eyes zeroed in on me. Even though he had the thickest pair of lens I had ever seen, I got the feeling that he could see me perfectly. I resisted the urge to straighten my clothes and tidy my shoulder length brown hair. If I had had them, I probably would have scooted a pair of glasses back up my nose. I was one of the few people on staff who didn't need them. It was probably a matter of time before the computers and too much reading took their toll on my blue-gray eyes.

“Who are you?” he said. I could see his fingers crawling through the mess of papers, still searching for whatever it was he was he had been looking for.

“Ada, from cataloging. I have some books for you.” I moved further into the room, careful not to trip on anything.

“What happened to Carol?”

“She retired. About two years ago.”

“Ah, well, put them there.” Jasper indicated a lone chair in front of his desk. Then, remembering his manners, he grunted a short thank you.

I hurried to set the books down. I was was turning to leave when I heard Jasper's dusty voice again, “You know, you're not wearing the right sort of gloves. You should be wearing cloth gloves, if

you're going to wear them at all. Leather gloves don't give you a secure grip.”

“Sorry. I'll remember for next time.”

I tugged my gloves off and tried not to grit my teeth as I reached for the doorknob. Jasper grunted again, giving his attention back to whatever it was that he was looking for. Just as I had expected, I felt a jolt as I grasped the knob. In rapid succession, images of hundreds of hands turning the knob flashed through my head, from the polite grad student's hand a few moments ago right up to the carpenter who installed it in the first place. Fortunately, it was over as quickly as it had started. I must have made a noise, because Dr. Jasper gruffly asked me what was wrong. I mumbled something in reply and hurried out the door.

I was almost to the first floor when the green-eyed grad caught up with me. “Dr. Jasper wants to see you for a minute.”

“What about?”

“He didn't say.”

“Can't he just e-mail me?” I took another step up the stairs. “I'm leaving for the day.”

“I don't think he has a computer. It seemed kind of urgent, though.”

“Fine,” I said shortly and hopped back down the stairs.

I followed the student back to Jasper's office. Audrey had fled for the night, and Special Collections was locked up and dark. The red light of the security system blinked on and off through the glass doors. When we arrived, the student pushed through Jasper's door. Before I could open my mouth to ask what was going on, Jasper shoved a scrap of card stock into my hand.

More images popped into my head, but nothing as innocuous as a hand turning a doorknob. I saw a pair of pale hands reaching out and plucking the postcard out of a box. I saw the postcard shoved into a dark, rectangular hole. A mailbox? More images. The inside of a bag, then a white box. The pitch black interior of a series of trucks. Envelopes shuffling through a rapid sorting system. Then another dark, square hole.

The last thing I saw was a young woman with long tangles of blond hair scratching away at a postcard. Her eyes were hidden by her hair. All I could see of her face was the tip of a fox-like nose and a tight, pinched mouth. Every now and then, she would stop and look over her shoulder, as if making sure that she was alone. Then she would return to the postcard. As soon as she filled in the available space, she turned it and started writing over the top of what she had just written, making a crosshatching of scrawled words. In a small empty corner of blank card, the woman wrote a few short lines—an address. As I watched her write, I felt an overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety. This

woman was afraid for her life. I was surprised she could still function. I was sure that I was only feeling a fraction of what she felt, and I wanted to huddle in a corner and shake like a scared child.

And then I passed out.

The next thing I knew, a two sets of eyes were staring down at me. One brown, one green. I could feel sharp corners digging into my back and arms. Card catalog drawers and books. The student was pushing curls of my hair back out of my face.

“I’m so sorry. My blood sugar must be low...” I started, dragging myself into a sitting position.

“No, it isn’t,” Jasper said, cutting me off. “What did you see?”

I stared at him in shock, willing my jaw to close. “What do you mean what did I see?”

The student took my elbow and helped me stand up. “Please, did you see anything? When you touched the card?”

“I didn’t see anything,” I snapped. “Excuse me.”

With as much dignity as I could muster, I walked out of the office. When I was out of sight of the door, I almost started running. In record time, I was back at my desk. I shut down my computer, snatched up my things, and headed out. I was on autopilot as I walked home through the university district. I tried as hard as I could to forget the face of the woman I had seen, those tangled strings of pale hair, and the desperation in the line of her mouth. The walk back to my apartment did nothing to calm me down.

When I reached my front door, I just stared at it for a moment. My knuckles were white as my hand clutched my keys. My fingers shook as I shoved the key into the lock. Pushing my way in, I dropped my backpack on the floor and kicked my shoes off. My coat landed next to the pack and I headed right for the couch. I scrubbed my face with my hands and ran my finger vigorously through my hair, making it crackle with static. Willing my heart to slow down to a more sensible rhythm, I contemplated the smooth white ceiling and the light fixture I kept meaning to replace with something more interesting. It was a long time before I was able to push away what I had seen.

I was peeling myself up off the couch at last when I heard a tentative knock at the door. I kicked my backpack and coat out of the way and cracked the door open. The student from the library was standing on my porch, looking a bit sheepish with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his black pea coat.

“Can I come in?” he asked.

“Not to be rude, but why are you here?” I replied, not budging.

“I want to explain about earlier.”

“There's nothing to explain.”

“Yes, there is. Can I come in?” he repeated.

“I don't want to talk about it—”

“This isn't about the fainting,” he interrupted. “It's about what you saw when you touched the postcard.”

“I didn't see anything. Now go away before I call the cops.” I started pushing the door closed, but he shoved his foot into the jamb.

“You saw a woman with green eyes, right?”

“I didn't see anything. Go away.”

“She's my sister,” he stated bluntly. “She was kidnapped two weeks ago.”

I stopped trying to close the door. “What?”

“She's my sister, Becca. That postcard is the only contact I've had with her since she went missing. I went to Dr. Jasper to try and find her.”

“That makes no sense.” It really didn't. Who has a family member get kidnapped and thinks, “Of course, I'll get a librarian to find them”?

“If you just let me in, I'll explain. I don't want to talk about this in front of your neighbors.”

“Fine, come in, then.” I pulled the door open to let the green-eyed man in, then I stopped. “Who are you? I never got your name.”

“Thom. Thom Vilkas.” He stuck out his hand.

“Ada Wright,” I answered and shook it, grateful that my little quirk didn't react when I touched people. “You're not a student, are you?”

“Not for a long time. Can I sit?”

“Sure. Now tell me, what's going on? Why aren't you letting the police deal with this?” I dragged a chair over from the dining table and perched on it across from where Thom sat on my faded green couch.

“A couple of months ago, my sister Becca, hooked up with a guy she met in bar,” he began, ignoring my question.

“I thought you said she was kidnapped two weeks ago?”

Thom blew out an exasperated breath. “I'm getting there. She met this guy, a couple of months back and started seeing him. A lot. They were out together every night. We didn't think much of it, but she started to change. Becca is a very lively person, but she started to be tired and prickly all the time. Wouldn't tell me what was going on. I didn't like what was happening to her, but whenever I asked her

about it she would snap at me and tell me to mind my own business,” he trailed off.

“What happened to her?”

“Three weeks ago I started to get really worried. I wouldn't see Becca at all for days. And when I did see her, she looked like a junkie. Pale, shaky, nervous. Then, two weeks ago, I couldn't find her. She completely disappeared. Wouldn't answer her phone. Wasn't in her apartment. She was just gone.”

“So why didn't you go to the police?” I asked. “They're supposed to investigate this stuff.”

“It's complicated. My family likes to settle things themselves.”

“Yeah, but kidnapping is illegal. You should call the cops,” I said again.

Thom leaned forward suddenly and grabbed my wrists. “I don't call the cops for things I can sort out myself. Would you just drop it?” He abruptly let me go, and I pulled back in my chair as far as I could.

“Fine, but then why did you go to Dr. Jasper? He's a librarian. How on earth could he help?”

Vilkas looked at me carefully. “You don't know about him, do you?”

“I guess not.”

“He finds things. He has a...knack for it, you could say.”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “He's a librarian, it's his job to find things.”

“No, I mean...He can find lost things. He can find anything—information, lost people—all sorts of things. I wanted to see if he could find my sister.” Thom's face was absolutely serious as he spoke. He believed what he was saying, no matter how ludicrous it sounded to me. Great, I thought, I have a crazy person in my house. I resisted the urge to mentally measure the distance to the phone. As it was, I was already calculating my odds on getting out the door before he could tackle me.

“Did he find her?” I asked, slowly. I'll humor him, I thought. Just until I can push him out the door.

“No.”

“Okay, so why am *I* involved?”

“Dr. Jasper said you could help. He says you have a knack, too.”

“A knack for what?” I asked. “I can't just find things!”

“I know that. He didn't tell me what he thought you could do to help me. But he did say that he wanted to see what would happen if you touched the card. That's why he had me bring you back.”

“Did he say what might happen?” I asked. I could hear a heavy dose of caution in my voice.

I knew exactly what would happen if I touched something like that postcard. You might not realize it, but objects have histories. You've heard of the Hope diamond right? That's it's cursed, and

people who touch it die or have terrible things happen to them? It's not like that with every object, but I can tell where things have been and what's happened to them. That's why I wear gloves when I have to touch something old. The more emotion—good, bad, or otherwise—that gets wound up with an object's history, the more I see or what ever it is that I do. Becca's postcard had obviously had a very turbulent history. I didn't want to touch it ever again. It's weird, I know, but I've always been able to do it.

I think people think I'm morbidly afraid of germs or something, since I wear my gloves so often. I don't mind that. It's better than what they'd think about me if they knew what was really going on. When someone asks me point blank, I tell them I have a weird circulation disorder. See? You can learn things from mystery novels.

“He wasn't sure. It was an experiment,” Thom said. He at least had the good sense to look embarrassed. “I'm sorry for what happened, if it's any consolation. I had no idea that just touching something would knock you out like that.”

I grunted. “So I fainted when I touched your postcard,” I started warily. “Why are you here?”

“Dr. Jasper thinks that you may have seen where the postcard came from. The building where she mailed it or something. All I know is that it came from Seattle, from the post mark.” Thom reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out the card. He held the scrap carefully in his long fingered hands and smoothed out the creased corners. “It got wet at some point and the ink ran. I can't tell if Becca wrote anything important.”

I glanced at the card. Thom was right. Since Becca had written so much, even writing back across the first lines, all the ink had bled together, obliterating the words. Someone must have dropped it in a puddle somewhere along the line. You could barely make out any of the words.

“Then why are you here in Augusta?” I asked. “Why didn't you go down to Seattle, then?”

“It was on the way,” he said. “And, to be honest, my mother recommended him. She said that Jasper helped her once before.”

“And Jasper thinks that I can see where things come from?” I tried to put as much skepticism as I could into my voice.

“You can, can't you? See where things have been just by touching them?”

“No, that's stupid,” I said flatly. “I don't care if Dr. Jasper thinks he can just find things or that he has a *knack* for finding things. I can't just see where things have been. I—”

Thom leaned forward on the couch. “I've heard—and seen—stranger things. Much stranger than this. Jasper was right, wasn't he?”

“Absolutely not.” I held on to my anger. If I stayed angry, maybe I could get this man out of my

house and out of my life. If I could just get rid of him, I could get back to normal. Tomorrow, things would be back to normal and I could pretend that I had never met Thom Vilkas and that Dr. Jasper needed to retire before he lost any more of his mind. “I want you to leave, Thom.”

“I believe that you can do this. Please, just hold the card. I just want you to try again.” Thom turned his gaze on me, a hopeful half smile on his face. “I know it was bad—”

“No, you really don't.”

“Please, I need to find Becca. You don't understand how important it is that I find her,” Thom blurted. He slid off the couch and crouched in front of me. He set the postcard on my lap. “She's my sister, Ada. Please, just try.”

My hands clenched the edges of my seat.

“Ada, please, just try once more. I believe that you can do this.”

“But it's crazy. I can't do this.”

Thom gave me a reassuring smile. “I've seen crazier things happen, really. Just try, Ada.”

I started down at the crisscrossed lines of blurry ink on the card, the address crammed into a corner. The post mark was smudged, but I could still read the name: Seattle, WA. The date on it was only six days ago.

I don't think I had ever deliberately used my “knack” to find out about something. I was pretty sure that I've never even been tempted to use it deliberately before, because I couldn't control it. I couldn't filter out the good from the bad. I saw everything. And I never knew if I would see something so disturbing that...so disturbing and frightening that I would do exactly what happened in Jasper's office today.

Thom was starting earnestly up at my face, trying to give me puppy dog eyes. He reached out slowly and took my hands in his. Gently, he rubbed the whiteness out of my knuckles with his thumbs.

“I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to do, but I am out of options. Jasper was a long shot. I didn't really think I'd get anything from him,” Thom said slowly. “Like I said, my mother suggested him.”

“So what am I? Your only hope?”

“Yes, Obi Wan. Your my only hope.” I saw him smile in spite of himself.

I stared down at the card in the hopes that it would magically disappear.

“Ada, please.”

I pulled my hands out of Thom's grip and reached for the postcard. I had a bare second after I touched the edges before I saw the mail boxes again and Thom's hands as he read the postcard for the

first time. I saw my own hand grasp it and saw myself keeling over like a Victorian with the vapors. I felt embarrassed all over again. Then images of the blond woman filled my mind. Again, I saw the sharp nose and tangled, dirty hair. I saw her hand blurring over the top of the card as she wrote. This time, I noticed that her fingernails were chewed down to the quick. The bloody red polish that decorated them was mostly gone, just a few flakes left. The woman—Becca—paused and tucked the hair back behind her ears. I thought I saw a resemblance to her brother in the her wide green eyes, but other than that they looked nothing alike. A half-sister, maybe?

I tried to focus on the room around Becca, but I couldn't see much. No windows. A basement? The walls were covered in faux wood paneling from the 70s and the floor had some awful green and yellow shag carpeting that looked like vomit done in textiles. I couldn't see a door. There was no furniture. Becca was kneeling on the floor, writing with the card held against her leg. The knees and thighs of her jeans were artfully shredded.

Then I got something new, Becca walking down a street in a black hoodie, still in her shredded jeans. A tall man with red hair was walking beside her, his hand wrapped tightly around her upper arm. The tall man called out to a couple of friends I couldn't see and waved cheerfully. While his attention was elsewhere, Becca's arm darted out and shoved her postcard into a cafe's mailbox. I pulled my attention away from Becca's furtive face and tried to concentration on the stores and restaurants. Tall brown and gray stone buildings lined the streets and long, narrow alleys opened between them. Black iron fire escapes. I spotted a street sign: Yessler Way.

Before I could take in any more details, I peeled my fingers away from the postcard at last. I was afraid to go any further back in the postcard's history. Something had happened to Becca to make her chronically terrified, and I really, really did not want to know what it was. I could still feel her fear. It made my heart race and my fingers shave.

“What did you see?” Thom asked, still kneeling on the floor in front of me.

Sucking in a breath, I pushed the card back towards him with the merest tip of my fingernail. Thom caught it before it hit the ground.

“Did you get anything?” he repeated.

“Not much,” I croaked. I ran through what I had picked up.

At least he hadn't lied, as far as I could tell. He listened to what I said without a flicker of disbelief.

“Somewhere on or near Yessler. Could you tell if it was near Pioneer Square or further back from the waterfront?” he asked.

I shook my head, “No. I couldn't tell. It's been a long time since I was there. I didn't recognize anything. Sorry.”

“Well, it's more than I knew before,” he said, tucking the card back into his coat pocket. He stood abruptly. “Do you think...?”

“That I could try again?” I asked softly. I scrubbed my hand on my thighs, trying to erase the feeling of sheer desperation and fear that I had picked up from Becca. “Third time's the charm?” I mocked. “Honestly, I think that I got as much as I could. I can't believe that you went for this. I mean, I'm no psychic.”

“I told you, I've seen and heard a lot weirder. Thank you for looking, for taking another shot at this.”

Thom walked over to the door and headed back out into the night. He was invisible within seconds. If nothing else, the man could make an exit.