

Twenty Books and a Cup of Tea  
December 2019

The sweet scent of lavender tea follows me as I drive from my house to our town's public library. A small library, it does its best on meagre funds and donations to provide the sanity-stabilizing books to those of us who live in this rural town surrounded by at least 40 miles of wind-swept prairie. The sun shines, belying the harshness of even our early winter days. The scent, I realize, is from the tea bag I was earlier handling. It couldn't, I thought, get much better than this. Sunshine in my eyes and lavender in the car.

And a book sale down the road.

Thrice yearly, our library makes money off the donations of the townspeople who back their vehicles into the parking lot and carry in box after box of the literary nourishment of the past months. Sometimes estates earmark their personal libraries for these sales. Volunteers, over many previous days, determine and mark prices. They decide on the best locations for the types and genres and place guiding cards and maps throughout the large basement room of the library. The books are then shelved meticulously for the ease of the patrons. Certainly, who would want to get lost in a library?

The basement room neither smells nor looks like a basement. Decorated in free-standing bookshelves, it assumes the feel of a well-stocked study in a Victorian home. That old smell associated with ancient, rare, or well-used tomes wafts through the aisles created by the walls of literature. The lavender smell loses its power to that of paper and bindings.

Upstairs, at the entrance to the library, the staff has marked the path to the basement stairs with laminated footprints. Each decal announces "BOOK SALE." I feel like Dorothy, following the yellow-brick road. I anticipate treasures. Tucked under my arm is a gift from the librarian at the high school where I taught many years earlier: a rainbow-striped canvas tote bearing the word READ. It is stout, large. It can carry many books. Faster, faster, on the footprints, down the stairs, into the labyrinth of bound booty.

I know not to overdo it, however. I remind myself that others will come, will need books. I know that I should not succumb to the irresponsibility that sets in the moment I enter a book store, thinking, "Bah, what is money?" I am clever now. I took from my wallet all but a twenty-dollar bill. I dumped any loose change into the can in the bedroom closet. However, I remind myself, smiling cunningly, that nearly all books are just one dollar. If I stay with the paperbacks, I could come home with, yes, twenty books.

What a delicious thought, ranking right up there with a hefty bag of nonpareils. But the chocolates and their sprinkles, which I always dab up with a moist finger, would be gone in a mere few days. Twenty books will last longer.

Mind, it is not an easy task to fill a bag with books. Our library's sales last several days, so the wise shopper must plan to arrive the first or second day. The crowds are courteous, but they are avid. They are not to be moved on or blocked as they read titles. Some come with planned

purchases. A bit of a gamble, I would say. Instead, I am one of those who plans to read every title in every bookcase of fiction and non—.

My strategy comes with a price. In ten minutes, my head crooked to the right, I feel as if my neck muscles are tightening to a point of no return. Eye strain sets in. My lower back whines via little stabs of pain. Having to reach high, having to stoop. The pile of chosen gems grows heavy in my right arm as the left relentlessly walks across the possibilities. My wooly coat becomes weighty. Ah, what the bookaholic has to suffer!

We are of one mind and motive, we bibliophiles. As we enter the basement sale area, we tacitly agree to the rules. Our voices drop to whispers, we tiptoe, we twine gracefully through each other as if we are square-dancing. We replace books exactly where we found them. We tolerate all behavior: the children running excitedly through the picture book section, the muffled snuffles and coughs of the infirm, those who are lugging boxes, even the woman who calls her husband and loudly asks what auto mechanic books he doesn't have. She looks around, blushes, says "Sorry" when she ends the call. Those near her smile commiseratively.

Twenty. I can come back next time, collect the ones I will this time miss. I lean the pile in my arms onto the table, whip out my money. The friendly volunteer reviews each pick with a smile or raised eyebrow. She holds Cunningham's *The Hours* in her hand and says, "Oh my." I respond, "I know." She invites me to become a volunteer for the sales. I fold and place the form neatly between Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*.

I take the elevator up to the ground floor, re-trace the floor decals, toss the heavy bag onto the passenger seat, and give out a loud, "Whoopie!" I lift out several books, fan them open, read a sentence or two at random, lovingly return them to the READ tote. They are all mine! The car fills with the scent of yellowed, worn pages. Grinning widely, I can't wait to get home, to another cup of lavender tea and the arduous task of choosing the first of the twenty books to read.