

POETRY



2016

Unlooked-for

A book is a match in the smoking second between strike and flame.

Archie says books are our best lovers and our most provoking friends. He's right, but I'm right, too. Books can really hurt you.

I thought I knew that, the day I picked up the Brian Patten. It turned out that I still had a lot to learn.

I usually get off my bike and wheel it on the last bit of my ride to work. Once you pass the bus stop, the cobbled road narrows and so does the pavement in this part of York, so it's a lot less hassle that way. That February morning, I was navigating around some it's-my-buggy-and-I'll-stop-if-I-want-to woman with her front wheels on the road and her back wheels on the pavement, when I saw the book.

It was lying on the ground next to a bin, as though someone had tried to throw it away, but didn't even care enough to pause to take proper aim. Anyway, I stopped. Of course. Who wouldn't rescue a book? The buggy-woman tutted, though I wasn't doing her any harm. She seemed the type who went through her days tutting, like a pneumatic disapproval machine. I've met plenty

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of those; they come with the nose-ring territory. They'd have a field day if they could see my tattoos.

I ignored her. I picked up the book, which was *Grimacing Jack*. It was intact, if a little bit damp on the back cover where it had been lying on the pavement, but otherwise in good nick. It had a couple of corners folded down, neatly, making interested right-angled triangles. I wouldn't do that myself – I'm an honourer of books and, anyway, how hard is it to find a bookmark? There's always something to hand. Bus ticket, biscuit wrapper, corner off a bill. Still, I like that there are some words on a page that are important enough for someone to have earmarked them. (Earmarked, in the figurative sense, has been around since the 1570s. In case you're interested. When you work within five metres of four shelves of dictionaries, encyclopaedia and thesauri, it's just plain rude not to know shit like that.)

Anyway. As Archie says, I digress. Buggy-woman said, 'Excuse me, I can't see past you,' but she said it politely, so I shuffed the back wheel of my bike onto the pavement so she could get a better look at the traffic. And then I remembered not to make assumptions and judgements. Everyone is allowed to like poetry. Even people who tut at cyclists.

I said, 'Is this your book? It was on the ground.'

She looked at me. I saw her clock the piercing and the fact that my hair is black but my roots are brown, and waver, but, to give her credit, she apparently decided not to judge, or maybe my clean fingernails and teeth swung things in my favour. Her shoulders dropped a little bit.



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'I can't remember the last time I picked up a book that didn't have lift-the-flaps,' she said, and I almost handed the book over to her, right then. But before I could offer it there was a break in the traffic and she launched herself across the road, trilling something about going swimming to her kid.

I looked around to see if there was someone close by who might have just dropped a Liverpool Poet, or be retracing their steps, searching, eyes to the ground. A woman standing outside the off-licence was going through her bag, urgently, and I was about to approach her when she pulled her ringing phone out and answered it. Not her, then. No sign of anyone in search of a lost book. I thought about leaving it on the off-licence windowsill, like you would with a dropped glove, but it doesn't take much in the way of weather to ruin a book, so I put it in the basket – yeah, I have a bike with a basket on the front, what of it? – and I kept on my way to the second-hand bookshop, where I've worked for ten years, since I was fifteen.

On Wednesdays I have a late start because I stay after hours on Tuesday for Book Group, which usually degenerates into something much less interesting after the second glass of wine. One of them is getting divorced. The rest are either envious or disapproving, though it's all hidden under sympathy. It's briefly amusing but ultimately unsavoury, like Swift.

One thing I do like about Book Group is that we host it rather than run it, so I drink tea and tidy up and listen in for the book-discussion bit, then zone out for the rest. It gives me the chance to do the things I can't do when the shop is open; it's amazing how much you get done when you're not interrupted. Archie



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says that if I had my way, bookshops would be set up like an old-fashioned grocery, with a counter and shelves behind it, so there were no pesky people messing up my beautifully ordered system. I say he's being unfair, but I don't think a Bookshop Proficiency Test would go amiss. Just some basic rules: put it back where you found it, treat it with respect, don't be an arse to the people who work here. It's not that hard. You'd think.

When I got in it was quiet. I was a bit late, partly because of the Brian Patten, but I was cutting it fine for an eleven o'clock start anyway. I stay after closing often enough for Archie to give me some leeway when I've got an urgent chapter to finish, though, so it's never a big deal. After I'd locked up my bike, I went to the cafe next door to get myself a tea and Archie a coffee before I made a start. If you ignore the silk flowers and the signs that say things like 'Arrive as a Stranger, Leave as a Friend', Cafe Ami is a pretty good neighbour.

I love stepping through the door of Lost For Words. The bookshop smells of paper and pipe-smoke. Archie doesn't smoke in the shop any more, officially at least. I suspect that he does when no one's around. All the years when he did go through the day puffing away non-stop have got into the walls and the wood and the pages of the books. There's something about standing, surrounded by shelves, that makes me think of being in a forest, though I've never, come to think of it, been in a forest. And if I was, I'm guessing the smell of smoke might not be a good thing. Anyway. I gave Archie his coffee.

"Thank you, my ever-useful right hand," he said. He's left-handed and he thinks that sort of thing is funny. I gave him



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a sarky smile and poked him in the waistcoat. There's a lot of Archie under that waistcoat. If you were going to stab him you would need a really long knife to get to any vital organs. He picked up his pipe. 'I'm going to take the air,' he said. 'Be excellent in my absence, Loveday.'

'As ever,' I said.

There are bay windows on either side of the shop door and one of them is filled by a huge oak pedestal desk. Archie says he won it from Burt Reynolds in a poker game in the late 1970s, but he's very hazy on the details. If all of Archie's stories are true, then he's about 300 years old – according to him he's had the bookshop for twenty-five years, been in the navy, lived in Australia, run a bar in Canada with 'the only woman who ever really understood him', worked as a croupier in Las Vegas and spent time in prison in Hong Kong. I believe the one about the bookshop and (maybe) the one about the bar.

It's a lovely desk, if you can find it under all of the papers. The letterbox is to the left of the shop door, and the end of the desk is underneath it; sometimes there are three days' worth of post and free newspapers on there before I clear them away. All Archie ever does is put more things on top of them.


The other bay window has a little window seat, which is about as comfortable as it looks – that is, not comfortable at all, although people who grew up on *Anne of Green Gables* can't help but sit in it. They never manage it for long. I think window seats are one of those things that are always better in books, like county shows held in fields on bank holiday Mondays, and sex and travel and basically anything you can think of.






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There was plenty for me to do. I know you're supposed to appreciate a lie-in, but I always just feel as though I've let the day get away from me and I'll never catch up. The only benefit is that I don't have to bring in the bags of books people leave in the doorway because they can't differentiate between a second-hand bookshop and a charity shop.



My dad's mum always used to be up with the sun. I can still hear her saying, 'Best part of the day, little one,' with her voice burring and her eyes smiling. My dad's parents were the first people I knew who died. We went to Cornwall twice that year, once in spring when Granny died of stomach cancer, then again in autumn when Grandpa followed her, and everyone shook their heads and said 'broken heart'. I suppose I was four or five. I remember thinking it was strange that Dad's parents had died but Mum was the one crying. The beach we used to go to near Falmouth – where my dad was from – was like a beach from a story-book: in my memory, the sand is yellow, the sea felt-tip-pen blue. We lived near the sea at home in Whitby, but the Cornish beach was different. It was magical. After Grandpa died, we didn't go back. Dad always said that there was no love lost between him and Auntie Janey, so I suppose there was no reason to.



I started with a bit of a tidy-up and I went on to the customer enquiries. Archie's an unreliable computer-user – he can do it, but he's erratic – so I looked at the emails first, sitting at the desk while he puffed away at his pipe outside on the pavement. There was nothing significant: an enquiry about a book we didn't have, an online sale. Five minutes and they were done,



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and then I looked through the box of enquiry slips. I started leaving them out for customers to fill in themselves because Archie only passes on the queries he thinks are interesting.

There was only one new one, and it was for a book we had a copy of in the storeroom upstairs, so I dug it out and put it in a brown paper bag, wrote the customer's name on it, phoned the customer to say it was waiting, and put it on the shelf behind the desk. It was a Jean M. Auel, something Archie would definitely have considered below his notice. It might have only been a fiver but I'd bet good money that all of my fiver book sales add up to more than Archie's precious first editions. In fact, I don't need to bet. I see the figures. Archie takes me to the meetings with the accountant, so I can listen to the bits he misses. He starts by nodding and then nods off, double-chin to chest. It's funny, he looks small when he's sleeping. When he's awake, and he's talking, he seems too big for the shop, too big for York, although he says the city is perfect for him. I asked him once how he ended up with the shop and he said, 'It was time to be contained,' which is a ridiculous answer. Another time he told me that he came to York to see a friend, 'got overly merry,' and bought the business on a whim. Also ridiculous, but more likely to be true.

Ben, who does house clearances and brings the books to us, had brought in a couple of boxes and, judging from the spines of the books I could see, they were going to be a welcome addition to the Music Biography (Classical) section: there was my work for the day. I like it when boxes like that come in, with a theme rather than a hotchpotch of collected living. It makes me



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feel as though I'm spending time with someone who had a bit of substance. Plus, there's always the possibility of what Archie calls buried treasure. A person with a passion is more likely to have bought and kept first editions and tracked down rare things for the sake of their content, but they won't have thought about financial value, because the value, for them, is all in the pages. Personally, I'm with them, but as Archie loves to point out, I'm not the one paying the rent.

Before I started on the box, I made a little notice – 'Found' – like the 'Lost' ones people make when their cats go missing. Like the cat hasn't just had a better offer and pissed off out of there. The notice said: 'Found: *Grinning Jack* by Brian Patten. If you are the (neglectful) owner, come in and ask for Loveday.' I stuck it in the window and tucked the book away, in the back, behind the door marked 'Private'. If no one else was going to appreciate it, then I would.

It takes Archie half an hour to smoke his pipe, gossip with everyone and anyone who's going past, and come back in again. He makes no concession to weather, and I kind of admire his commitment, though I'm well aware that if he was smoking cigarettes I might not be as sympathetic. The smell of cigarette smoke reminds me of my dad. My mother made him stop when money was tight. Even now, cigarette smoke makes me uneasy, and at the same time it smells something like home.

There was a biography of J. S. Bach in the box, and when I opened it up I found a piece of greaseproof paper, carefully folded to enclose a rose. The paper crackled as I unbent it, but didn't break; the rose seemed more brittle than the wrapping,



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and I held my breath over it, not wanting to touch it with anything at all, in case I broke it apart. The petals might have been pink, once, but they had become a dusty grey, tucked away from air and light. I refolded it in the paper and pinned it on the 'Found in a Book' noticeboard at the front of the shop, wondering who had saved it, and why; whether it had been pressed on an impulse and forgotten, or whether it was a symbol of something more significant. I find the fact that I'll never know quite comforting. It's good to be reminded that the world is full of stories that are, potentially, at least as painful as yours.

* * *

A week passed, and there were no takers for the Brian Patten. I was planning to take the sign down that afternoon. My plan was to tuck the book behind the counter and then give it to someone who was buying something that suggested they might appreciate it. I wasn't going to sell it; that didn't feel honest. Yeah, I sometimes over-think. There are worse faults.

I was having my lunch in the back of the shop, which is basically: a tiny loo and hand basin behind an ill-fitting wooden door that needs a yank to close it and a shove to open it; an armchair in front of the fire exit; a shelf; a bin and the Hoover underneath the shelf. The armchair is big and comfy, jammed into the space: I can sit cross-legged in it. I have cereal and a banana for lunch – which is also what I have for breakfast, but I like breakfast best, so why the hell shouldn't I have it twice a day? – and I was halfway through it when I heard Archie calling my name.



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When Archie calls it's usually because one of 'my' customers (i.e. one of the ones he doesn't like) comes in. It won't be a question about stock, because I swear he knows every single book in the shop, and where it is.

Archie and I are alike in that we have a low tolerance for people who annoy us – not an advantage in the customer service game, as he says – but the good thing is that different categories of people wind us up. I don't like people who giggle. He says there's nothing wrong with a little bit of *joie de vivre*. He doesn't like people who smell. I say you shouldn't penalise people for their circumstances and books don't care when you last washed. I don't like people who try to knock down the price or bang on about how they could get it cheaper on the internet. Those people don't realise that, for a lot of rare books, if they search the internet they'll end up at us anyway, but we'll charge them postage, too. I quite like it when that happens. A bit of *schadenfreude* really brightens up twenty minutes in a post office queue. I feel like Becky Sharp from *Vanity Fair*.

Archie doesn't like the people he calls superfans, but I like a bit of focus in my customers. There's nothing wrong with wanting to own every edition of every book by a particular writer, and most of the authors who are being pursued through our shelves are dead, so if they're not bothered by obsessive fans, I don't see why we should be.

I thought the visitor was probably a collector, who Archie would automatically pass to me, regardless of how far through my lunch I was. I overlook his minor infringements of employment law on the basis that his good points outweigh his flaws by



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a ratio of about three to one. The old lady gothic novel fan has a sixth sense for when she can ruin my lunch by interrupting me, so I was expecting it to be her, but as I rounded the end of the cookery section, I saw that Archie was talking to someone I had never met. I'd have remembered.

Leather coat and a crew cut, metallic-blue DMs laced up differently, a laugh – Archie looked as though he was on a charm offensive – like sea over gravel. Archie saw me coming and he caught my eye.

'Brace yourself,' he was saying, 'she doesn't approve of people who aren't good to books.'

'Fair enough,' said the stranger. 'I don't approve of them either.'

'Here she is,' Archie said. 'My straywaif.' I thought for a horrible moment that he was going to launch into his how-I-met-Loveday story, but he managed to resist.

'Can I help?'

'You certainly can,' said the stranger. 'You already have, I believe.' He smiled and his teeth were straight and even, middle-class teeth, braced into conformity at great expense, no doubt.

'Really?' He could work for it.

'Loveday,' Archie said, 'this gentleman is in search of a missing poet.'

'The sign in the window. The book.' The stranger's voice was clear and I couldn't find an accent in it, not that it was exactly posh, either.

'I found it on the pavement,' I said. I sounded accusatory. I didn't mind. Poetry has a difficult enough time without people throwing it away.






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‘I think it fell out of my pocket,’ he said. ‘It’s quite deep but I was reading it on the bus, then I realised I’d nearly missed my stop, and I don’t think I put it away properly.’ He put his hand into the pocket of his coat and it disappeared up to the wrist. I noticed that his hands were long, even in proportion to the rest of him, his fingers tapering, the tip of his thumb arching away from his hand, as though it was going to do a runner.

‘Uh-huh,’ I said. I figured he could work a bit harder, though it amused me that he thought he had to make a case, as if he’d arrived late for a job interview.

‘And I love the Liverpool Poets,’ he said. ‘I studied them. People don’t realise they pretty much invented performance poetry. They invented The Beatles, come to that.’



I didn’t need to hear his dissertation. ‘I’ll just go and get it,’ I said. I had a spoonful of cereal when I went through to the back, but it had gone to mush.



‘Our neglectful new friend is a poet himself,’ Archie said when I returned.

‘Then he should know better than to fold down the corners of poetry books,’ I said, and gave him his Brian Patten back. I wasn’t going to be impressed. I’ve got a couple of notebooks of my own poems at my place; I wouldn’t tell people I’m a poet. I’d tell them I work in a bookshop. If I thought it was any of their business.

‘I know, it’s a terrible habit,’ said the leather-coat-poet, and he smiled and I smiled back, even though I didn’t really want to. Smiles give too much away. More than your teeth.

He tucked the book into his pocket and pulled the flap over the top, as if to show me that he’d learned his lesson. It was



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the beginning of March, cold still. I wondered what he wore in summer.

‘Well, I’ll be more careful in future.’ He made a gesture – I thought he was saluting, but then I realised it was a sort of hat-tip, though he wasn’t wearing a hat, so it came off slightly stupid, or it should have done. Then he held out his hand to me to shake, and I shook it. He said, ‘Thank you, Loveday. Nathan Avebury.’ His wrists were slim, straight.

‘No problem,’ I said. This is why I don’t like talking to people. I never think of anything interesting to say. I need time to find words, and that’s hard when people are looking at me. Also, I don’t like people much. Well, some are okay. But not enough to make it a given.

He turned away and I realised there was something in my hand. A chocolate coin, wrapped in gold foil and thoughts of long-ago happy Christmas mornings. If he’d been looking at me when I realised, waiting for a reaction, I would have written him off as a stupid show-off. But the bell above the door had already jangled out the message that he’d gone, and when I looked up there was no sign of him outside.

‘Well,’ Archie said. ‘Nathan Avebury.’

‘Do you know him?’ I asked.

There aren’t a lot of people in this corner of York that Archie doesn’t know. He’s friends with the publicans, though they’ve started to change over the last few years now the pubs have become more like restaurants, run by foodies rather than drinkers. He makes a point of shopping in all the nearby places, buying cushions and paintings of the coast, artisan chocolates







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and lots and lots of cheese. His doctor is always talking to him about cholesterol and losing weight, but Archie says good relationships are more important than being able to see your feet.

‘I only know him by reputation,’ Archie says. ‘Time was, he was the next big thing.’

I knew he was waiting for me to ask for details, so I didn’t. I went back to the armchair and ate the rest of my banana, and when I came back into the shop I took the ‘Found’ notice down. Then I got stuck in to the box of music biographies again.



There were no more treasures among the pages, no pressed flowers or postcard bookmarks or names on the flyleaf that made me wonder. My favourite, ever: a 1912 edition of *Mansfield Park*, which had ‘Edith Delaney, 1943’ written in the careful, joined-up writing of a child on the inside front cover. The ‘Delaney’ was crossed through and ‘Bishop’ written underneath. Then ‘Bishop’ crossed out and another name, a longer, double-barrelled one, scored through so thoroughly that it’s impossible to make out. ‘Brompton-Smith’ is my best guess. Then ‘Humphrey’ underneath that. All the same handwriting, but you can see she’s getting older. I’ve got the book at home. Along with my wages I get a book allowance and this was one of the first ones I took. I look at it and I think, well, Edith Delaney-Bishop-Brompton-Smith-Humphrey, I hope you married them all because you liked them, even if Brompton-Smith turned out to be a bastard, by the looks of it. Good for you for taking no shit off anyone.

* * *

Wednesday is Archie’s bridge night so he left early, putting on his Crombie coat with the moss-green velvet collar and



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shouting, ‘Toodle-oo, Loveday’ as he went. I stayed a bit late, getting through the box, putting aside the books that I thought were worthy of Archie’s attention. I always lock myself in at five, because late afternoon is Rob’s favourite time for coming in and talking about how I should go out with him again as we got off on the wrong foot. He wouldn’t try anything nasty – he wouldn’t dare – but I can’t be bothered with him. Well, I can’t be bothered with men in general, so if I’m not getting any of the alleged thrills, I’m sure as hell going to do without the aggro.

At five fifteen, there was a tap on the door, and there was Rob’s grinning face, making a ‘let-me-in’ gesture. I shook my head, pointed at the ‘closed’ sign, and went back to what I was doing. He knocked a couple more times but I ignored him. Then there was a sort of crunching, rattling sound and I realised he was pushing a rose through the letterbox. It’s one of his regular tricks. He also brings in chocolates for me and leaves them with Archie because he knows I won’t take them from him. I don’t eat them; I put them on the big table with a ‘help yourself’ sign and they’re gone within an hour. I’d like to think that Rob would read the sign as a bit of advice for him – as in, ‘please get yourself some help’ – but if he comes in when the chocolates are out he just looks pissed off.

Rob stood there for a bit longer waiting for me to go and get the rose, but I didn’t, so he went away, giving the door handle a last, vicious rattle as he went. I picked up the stem and crushed petals from the desk and was taking them through to the bin





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when the letterbox rattled again and I jumped. I turned around and saw the back of a leather coat swirling away, and there was a leaflet sticking through the letterbox.

Poetry Night at the George and Dragon
Wednesdays from 8 p.m. £3 entry. Open mike.

There were Facebook details at the bottom. I put it on the community noticeboard, which is next to my noticeboard of things we've found in books, and I locked up and left. I pass the George on the way home; it's on the corner before the cycle lane starts.

I didn't go in.

I wondered if that twirling-away of leather was the last I'd see of Nathan Avebury. But no. He came back the next week.

* * *

'Hello, Loveday,' he said.

I turned around and nodded, then went back to what I was doing. I'm not paid to pass the time of day with any old poet who wanders in. That's Archie's job.

I was tidying up the Sci-fi section – it never stays neat for more than half a day – and had my back to the door when he came in, though I'd heard Archie greeting someone. I hadn't bothered to look; Archie greets most people as though they are a visiting foreign dignitary, a lover, or someone recently returned from the dead.

Nathan didn't move away. He was still there when I got to Wilder, Wyndall and Zindell. I stood up. He was looking at the





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shelves, idly, as though he was killing time waiting for something. A bookseller, for example.

His boots were still laced up differently, one criss-crossing on the front, one straight across. I wondered if he noticed, or cared. He noticed me looking.

‘Magician’s trick,’ he said. ‘If people notice the lacing it distracts them. Also, if people notice that, I know they’re the noticing sort, and I have to be careful.’

I nodded. I could see the sense in that. I liked it better than carelessness, or affectation. If I cared, which I didn’t.

‘Magician?’ I asked, and then remembered. ‘The chocolate coin.’

‘Close-up magic,’ he said. ‘It’s sort of my day job, though it’s quite a lot of evenings. Afternoons are kids’ parties; evenings are corporate events. Poetry doesn’t really pay the rent.’

I laughed. I’m not sure why. I think I was amused by the idea of being a magician as a day job. Most people with a day job work in a shop or a call centre, or serve cream teas to tourists while wearing a mob cap, around here at least.

‘I thought I’d come and take a look at the poetry section,’ he said.

‘I’ll show you,’ I said. The shop isn’t huge but it’s twisty, and it’s easier to take people than to explain where to find things. The poetry books live along the back wall, with the plays and the old maps. Archie isn’t a fan of poetry and plays because he says they shouldn’t be written down, so he’s put them in the darkest corner he can find. The walls all have shelves built along them, in a mishmash of a way, different heights and depths in different





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places. Fiction goes all around the walls, and then the middle of the shop is filled with freestanding bookcases, back to back and at right angles with each other around a central table. They're all different, but what they have in common is that they are all some kind of old, solid wood, uncomplaining, doing the heavy lifting of non-fiction in all of its glorious forms. Although, give me a novel any day.

I led Nathan to the back wall. His boots squeak-squeaked behind me, and I was suddenly aware of my spine, my arse, the back of my neck where I'd bunched my hair in an elastic band to keep it out of my face. I stood straighter, and turned when we got there.

'Poetry,' I said.

'Thanks,' Nathan said. He smiled. He seemed to smile a lot.

'All part of the service,' I said.



Then Melodie appeared. When we're swamped, Archie pays her to do a bit of shelving, and she does a good job, but she witters on the whole time, like a trapped chaffinch, and it drives me demented. When she's not doing her main job – leading tourist walking tours – she treats the shop like her living room, sitting at the table with a coffee, making impossible-to-ignore phone calls, using the Wi-Fi. You couldn't pay me enough to be herded around York and yammered at by Melodie, but I think she probably does quite well. She's big-eyed and big-mouthed and tiny, a pert kitten of a thing. I think her mother's Malaysian, though I have no idea why I've remembered that. When she's in the shop she keeps up a constant monologue, which I try to drown out by turning my own mental chatter up, but some



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things must permeate. She's not backward in coming forward, as my dad used to say.

'Loveday showing you the poetry section?' Melodie asked.

'That's right,' Nathan said.

'Alphabetical order,' Melodie said. 'I did it last week. I like my poets stay in line.' She talks in this pirate patois that I think she must have picked up from a film, because I know for a fact that she grew up in Pickering.

'Noted,' Nathan said. 'I won't disturb the line.'

'Hello.' She held out a little hand, palm-down, fingers draping, as though she thought he should kiss it.

He shook it and smiled. 'I'm Nathan Avebury,' he said.

'Nathan Avebury,' Melodie said, 'it lovely to meet you. I am Melodie. Like in music.' She held the chocolate coin up to the light, turning it slowly, cool as you like, as though its appearance in her palm was exactly what she had expected.

'Melodie works here sometimes, when we're busy,' I said.

'Loveday work here all the time,' Melodie supplemented, 'every day. This her world. I come and go, as I please.' She turned away, with a cat-eye look, and I found myself looking at Nathan to see what he was making of it all. He watched her go – she was wearing denim shorts over black tights, plimsolls, a striped jacket – and then he looked at me and he smiled.

'It's a great world to spend every day in,' he said. His eyes were the kind of blue you find on self-help book covers, to suggest clarity and calm.

'Yes,' I said. I liked that he didn't bitch about Melodie. I don't like her but I don't like people who are nasty either, espe-



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cially about easy targets. Like women with tattoos and a nose-ring, for example. Still, if I take a bus, I mostly get a seat.

We looked at each other for a minute and I wished I was like Archie, who can start a conversation with anyone, about anything. Half the people who come into the shop are people he's got talking to at art gallery openings or while buying sausages at a farmers' market. He's just at ease. I'm not. Well, not with new people. It takes me a while to get comfortable with them, and in the bit when I'm getting comfortable I don't say much, and what I do say is pretty everyday. Archie says I keep all my interesting bits well hidden and getting to know me is an exercise in faith rewarded. I think he thinks he's being nice.

I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I said, 'I'll leave you to it.'

'Great,' Nathan said.

Another box had come in. It was full of run-of-the-mill 1990s mid-range paperbacks, Penguin Classics, the ones with the black covers and the National Gallery chocolate-box paintings on the front, hardly touched. Nothing special, or at least, nothing remarkable: Eliot, Trollope, Dickens.

We have what Archie calls the 'breakfast bar' at the back of the shop. It's basically a deep shelf fixed halfway up the wall, and a high stool to sit on while you work there. There's a couple of old mugs, filled with pens and bits of paper for notes. The breakfast bar is where we sit to sort the books that come in. I say 'we' but Archie's not a fan of this part of the business. We (I) can work as well as keep an eye on the shop: there's a



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convex mirror fixed over the top so we can see who's coming and going, if there's only one of us here. He lets me do the first sift and look over anything interesting that comes in. I was eighteen and I'd worked here for three years before I was allowed to do it on my own. 'Off you go, Loveday,' Archie said that day, 'consider yourself qualified.' It felt better than my A Level results did, better than the applause at the end of the school play when I was a kid. I didn't go straight back to my flat that night. I went to the river and I sat by the water and I thought; *Loveday, it might be okay.*

As I started to take the Penguin Classics out of the box, I felt a bit odd. I was free-floating above myself, as though something important was happening. It was like the feeling I had when I checked inside the dust jacket of a recently delivered and ordinary-looking 1930s hardback to find that it was actually a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, disguised to get through customs. They're really rare, because once they got into the country, the spurious dust jackets were thrown away. I knew it was worth hundreds of pounds and at the same time I couldn't believe it was in my hands. But there was nothing in this box that was anything special for a collector, so the looking-down-at-the-sea-from-a-cliff feeling it was giving me didn't make any sense.

Then I realised what it was. They were all books that my mother had owned. Every single one. She knew books were important, my mother, and she liked that I liked reading, and she encouraged me to do it. She had a little set of bookshelves in the living room under the stairs – we lived in a tiny new build



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on the outskirts of Whitby, which probably looked quite big before the furniture went in, but felt squished even to little me.

The top shelf was for the black-bound Penguin Classics, the middle shelf, for the books I didn't keep in my bedroom – ponies, fairies, picture-books I refused to get rid of, even though I thought I was too old to read them – and the bottom was puzzle magazines and copies of women's magazines that my mum's friend Amanda passed on to her, though I don't know that she ever read those either. On the top of the shelf unit were photos in frames, all permutations of twos – me and Mum, me and Dad, Mum and Dad – because Dad was very precious about his camera, so we only took photos when he was around, and when he was around he wanted us to spend time, just the three of us, no one else, so we could make the most of things. He was precious about us, too. Or was it that we were precious to him? God, I don't love much but I love words. We all looked happy enough in the photos, I think. After the frames got broken there was nothing on top of the shelf unit any more.

Like I say, the books weren't unusual. You could get them in any bookshop, anywhere. But the fact that they were all ones we'd had at home made me feel . . . well, something. A pricking of my thumbs.

I took the Penguin Classics and I stood them, spines facing out, against the wall at the back of the breakfast bar shelf. I wanted to see how they looked. Could they really be the ones I remembered, or was I trying to make something that wasn't there?



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I wasn't sure, at first.

Then I remembered that my mother used to put things in alphabetical order by the first word of the title. I've sometimes wondered if we should do that here. Most people remember titles more than authors, so it might make sense. At home, I just go with 'read' and 'unread', and move books from one shelf to another. Why waste precious reading time on sorting, that's what I say.

But my mother started at *Anna Karenina* and ended at *Wuthering Heights*. She said her books looked tidier that way. She also organised clothes by colour, which was great if you wanted your vest and your tights to match, less helpful if you wanted to find one of everything. My dad used to tease her about it. 'What's your mother like, Loveday?' he used to say, and I knew that was my cue to roll my eyes.

When I rearranged the books by title, I felt dizzy. As though I'd stepped too close to the cliff edge, and the land was slipping away from the soles of my feet. Because they seemed right. As though they could really be the actual books that sat on the bookshelf in our house.

I could smell the smells of that first home: salt from the sea, and the damp earth of my mother's endless (endlessly dying, she never learned) potted plants. The house was rented and Mum was always saying how, when we had a place that was really ours, she would paint everything green. 'There's an upside to living like this, then,' my dad would say, and sometimes he made it sound funny and sometimes he said it in a way that made Mum say, 'Oh, Patrick,' and reach out to touch his arm or his cheek.







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There were even twenty-six books on the bench in front of me. I counted them. And then I counted them again, like a man with a metal-detector who can't believe he's seeing the coins in his palm.

Twenty-six books. The ones my mother bought, once a fortnight, for a year, beginning with a bright New Year resolution and ending with a cold New Year's Eve, the year I was eight.



We used to go to the bookshop near the bridge in the centre of Whitby, every other Friday after school. It was a little shop, cramped, with just a shelf or two for everything, but the lady in charge always smiled and said she could order anything we wanted. It was a warm place. I could choose a book for me, and Mum would have a long chat with the bookshop owner about what she was going to add to her collection. I don't think she ever told her that she didn't read them, but then again, I know she wouldn't have lied. And she meant to read them, I'm sure, she just never did. After a year she stopped buying them. Her resolution the next year was to learn to dance. She didn't do that either. She found a class but my dad didn't like the idea of her dancing with other people.



Anyone who's worked in a bookshop for longer than an afternoon will tell you that people buy books for all sorts of reasons. There's the simple love of books, of course: the knowledge that here is an escape, a chance to learn, a place for your heart and mind to romp and play. Recommendations, TV shows, desire for self-improvement, the need to impress or the hope of a better self. All valid reasons, none of them guaranteeing that



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the book will be opened at all. I think my mother liked the covers, the word ‘classics’, and the possibility of other worlds.

Of course, I have no one to talk about these things with. No one would remember the bookshelf, or if they did, they wouldn’t remember which books and which order.

Sitting there at the back of the shop I also felt my world overlap with my only real childhood home, smelling the vanilla pot pourri that was supposed to disguise the cigarette smoke, listening to my mother pottering in the kitchen. I would pull out the books and look at the covers, spell out the titles. *The Mill on the Floss* sounded strange, because I didn’t know that the Floss was a river. ‘You’re a little young yet, angel,’ my mother said when she looked through the doorway and saw me turning the pages. I remember the words were crammed on to the pages like sweets in a jar.

‘Loveday,’ Nathan said, behind me.

I jumped. I mean, really, physically, arse off the stool for a nanosecond.

‘Sorry,’ he said.

‘No problem,’ I said. ‘I’m just . . . I was busy.’

‘My parents have Penguin Classics,’ Nathan said. ‘There are hundreds, aren’t there?’

‘Yes.’ I could have added, ‘My mother had some’ – the words were almost in my mouth – but I don’t talk about myself. So I just sat there, doing a fair impression of the sulky emo-goth I look like.

‘Well,’ Nathan said, ‘I found this.’ He held up a copy of *Penny Arcade* by Adrian Henri. The slender spine was cracked, and



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there was a brown ring left by a coffee mug on the cover. 'I don't have it. I should. Unless I dropped it getting off a bus.'

I smiled. Yes I did. 'It's got "At Your Window" in it.' Anyone who likes Henri likes 'At Your Window'. I can talk about what's in books.

'I saw,' he said. 'Genius.'

'Over-used term,' I said.

'Couldn't agree more,' he said – he can smile and talk at the same time – 'but in this case, justified.'

I didn't agree, but I didn't say so. 'At Your Window' is about a cat who can't see why anyone wouldn't want a dead mouse. It made me think of Rob and his roses.

Nathan did the hat-tip-without-a-hat and turned away, but then swung back. 'I left a leaflet last week, about a poetry night. It's on Wednesdays at the George and Dragon. It's tonight.'

'I found it,' I said. 'I put it on the noticeboard at the front, next to the one with the book finds.' I pointed, helpfully, in case he didn't know where the front of the shop was, or what a noticeboard looked like. I despair of myself sometimes. I'd like to blame the shock I felt at seeing those twenty-six books. But I don't know that I need an excuse to be incapable of sensible human interaction.

'I know,' he said, and he stopped smiling. 'Thanks, but I meant it as an invitation for you.'

'Me?' I thought for a horrible minute that he knew I wrote poetry, that I'd transmitted my dream/nightmare: me on a stage, me reciting my poems, the lights coming up and all the