

Union Books

By Kit Cox



Bryan smiled to himself as he lent his bike against the wall and removed his padlock from the saddle bag. Of course he remembered a time when he could leave his bike outside all day without having to worry but now he wasn't so sure. Nothing had ever happened to suggest it was any less safe but ...well you read things didn't you. No the smile came from the fact his shop was at the bottom of a particularly fine hill with no traffic and few people. At this time of the day it meant you could indulge your inner child, take your feet off the peddles and free-wheel all the way down. Of course it was one of the few smiles he got these days. For a start he had to cycle that same hill back at the end of the day, from a shop that pretty much struggled to make enough money to keep its lights on.

Union books (as the sign read), was the perfect independent bookshop, full of dusty old tomes, local guides, dog eared paperbacks with pencilled prices (significantly lower than the asking price or converted to modern money) and a smattering of new reads. The only thing it lacked was customers.

Bryan loved the smell that wafted out of the old door, still decorated with its original bulls eye glass panels, as he turned the worn gold chub key and swung it open on ancient hinges, thick with peeling paint. It smelt of creativity and dust. It smelt warm, despite the lack of heat.

He went through his normal routine, kettle on, unlocking the cash draw and tipping in the plastic bag of change and sorting it out (he never left money in the shop) and by that time the kettle was singing and tea was brewed, loose leaf and in a pot as was proper. No milk, no sugar.

Bryan scoured his shelves with his favourite mug steaming aromatically in hand, as he looked for a book to read. A day spent improving his knowledge of his world and stock would follow, with only the slight chance of being disturbed by Carol from the bakery.

“Moths of the British Isles
Bernard Skinner”

Found its way into Bryan's hands and he smiled as he settled into his worn, brown leather chair behind the desk. There was a dead Moth in the window, it had been there for months and finally he may find out its genus and smugly announce to the first person who mentioned “There's a moth in the window.” That it was actually “Insert Latin name here.” He chuckled to himself at a joke well planned, when his door opened and the small bell rang above, giving him a quizzical expression, as it hadn't rung in years. He saw it as a sign it would soon fall off.

The woman who wandered in was a bookish type. He didn't recognise her so she was certainly one of the many visitors to the picturesque town and most likely a book tourist rather than a buyer. He nodded and smiled and she turned and smiled back, revealing a small white owl sat on her shoulder like a parrot.

Bryan was taken aback for a moment, thinking it was stuffed and an eccentric embellishment for a hippy type traveller wanting to cause whispered conversation in her wake but it turned and fixed him with large amber eyes.

“I put the Harry Potters in amongst General Fiction.” he found himself saying to the short haired woman, quite out of his normal character.

"Very wise, you don't want Adults searching in the Children section for their magic." The woman said with a delicate, accented English. She smiled and wandered over to the shelves, eyes perusing the titles as she approached.

Bryan felt he should carry on the conversation before it became too awkward to do so.

"I don't actually have a children's section." He paused, still uncomfortable with the sound of his own voice "I see books as being ageless." Even to him the statement sounded pretentious, though he believed it with all his heart. The woman turned to face him and cocked her head slightly.

"Are you looking to cost it up?" she asked seriously, glancing at the book in Bryan's hands.

Bryan looked down at his requisition from the shelves, before holding it up and tapping the printed price on the back. He was pretty sure the shelves had had it from new so he wouldn't have felt like adding a pencilled cost in the front pages.

"I was talking about the moth in the window. I assume it's for sale, being in such a prominent position." She smiled.

"I was trying to identify the breed." Bryan said as studiously as possible, slightly annoyed at being upstaged by a timelier joke.

"Carcina quercana." The woman answered with a practiced grasp of Latin and a lilt to her voice that identified the delicate accent as Italian.

"You know moths well or is that a guess?" said Bryan questioningly, as he checked the index and flipped back to the page number of the identified corpse, slightly disappointed to find a picture of the moth he had sat in his window. A day of purposeful reading was suddenly blown.

"I read it in a book." The lady answered as the owl pulled at the weave of her jumper.

"At least someone still does." Bryan said with a finality he was coming to grips with. The shop had more bills through the door than customers and even for a business like this it couldn't support itself on goodwill.

"Is there a problem?" the woman asked, with genuine concern to her voice.

Bryan snorted derisively "Oh no problem, just people don't buy books anymore."

"Well no one ever did." She answered taking a seemingly random book off the shelves and smelling the spine with her eyes closed. "Books choose a new owner and lure you in." She opened her eyes and fixed them firmly on Bryan. "That's always been the way of things."

Bryan laughed "Be that as it may, I wish a few more of mine would lure people in because they don't seem to realise they are destined to be paired up with a new companion, who will hopefully pay me cash, that I get to give to the bank manager, who in return allows me to continue to trade and keep a roof over their heads."

The woman looked around "Well I'm not surprised these books aren't luring. Half of them are asleep and some, I'm afraid to say, have died. The new ones are young and with no wiser books to show

them how to lure, they're just not getting the skills." She turned back to Bryan. "I could help wake them up if you want?"

Bryan smiled, the woman was cute and he was actually too enamoured of her charming ways to judge her sanity.

"Feel free but don't wake them all, I'm running a book shop not a zoo."

"As you wish." the woman smiled and looking at the book in her hands she stroked gently across the cover and bent close whispering.

The actions were so enchanting that Bryan found that he lent forward trying to hear the words, fully caught up in the bizarre theatre of it all.

Finally the woman turned the book so it remained closed, spine in her hand and blew delicately across the closed pages. She smiled like a mother who had been caught watching an infant as it awoke and with a slight gentle movement stepped to the window and placed the book in the sunshine.

The front door opened quietly and Carol (from the bakery) stood in the doorway, her eyes appraising the customer. The two couldn't have been more opposite and yet somehow similar. They were roughly the same size and build as each other but Carol was pale of skin and ginger haired, the customer was slightly tanned and dark haired, a darkness that reflected in her eyes. Carol's bright green eyes scanned the woman's eclectic clothes, the heavy suede skirt hung over leggings and her sensible walking boots, highlighting the top that clung to her curves with soft, subtle printed material, directly contrasting the machine printed, hard wearing fabric of the not so flatteringly cut uniform of the bakery employee.

"Carol?" Bryan said as if to cut through into a tense Mexican standoff. It did the job and snapped his friend from her strange appraisal of the customer.

"Oh sorry Bryan." she stammered like a child caught doing something they shouldn't. Bryan was always aware Carol had a way of making herself seem older than she was and the sudden childish awkwardness and flush of her cheeks was almost endearing, causing the bookseller to smile warmly at his friend and she blushed more. "I came in to buy a book." She blurted, to cover her embarrassment.

"A book?" said Bryan quite surprised. Carol would often find excuses to come into the shop but buying a book had never been one of them, despite its obvious appropriateness.

"Yes!" She said again and lent into the window and took out the very same one the customer had just placed there. It seemed a random choice, especially as Carol had never bought a book before...well not from Bryan. "This one..." she looked at the cover as if for the first time and a smile went across her face "I had it as a child." She said to herself as if in a trance, then moved quickly over to the desk and Bryan stood to take the book from her as if it was a solemn occasion desiring pomp and ceremony. There was a brief moment where Carol didn't seem to want to let go and then Bryan had the book in his hands. It was an old hard back copy of fairy tales. An embossed gold illustration

of a knight on horseback looking up at a princess in a tower, adorned the rough sky blue cover. Bryan smiled and handed it back.

“Then please have it. A gift, from me.” He said happily, not taking Carol as a nostalgic book buyer.

“No let me pay.” She said fumbling in the simple pockets of her uniform’s trousers.

“After all the cakes and bread you’ve given me over the years? No chance, it’s my payment back for a lifetime of kindness.” He grinned.

“They were just overstocks they would have gone stale and been binned. This has value.” She blushed, half turning towards the female customer.

“The cakes meant a lot to me too, when I was hungry.” Bryan said smiling and was pleased when Carol’s blush turned into a smile too.

“Thank you.” She whispered and then suddenly feeling uncomfortable blurted “I must get back to the shop, it’s unmanned.” And with a single movement she turned, nodded at the customer and left quickly, ringing the bell as she went. Bryan watched her go past the main window and out of sight.

“I told you things just needed waking up.” And Bryan was snapped from his trance to look back at his remaining customer, somehow instantly aware she was a lot older than her persona dictated to the world. “See Bryan, books need to be woken. They can’t just sit and hope to be noticed. That would take forever.”

“How do you know my name?” Bryan asked surprised.

The customer smiled and pointed towards the door “The ginger-haired princess called you Bryan. Sorry I shouldn’t have assumed it was a name I could just use.”

“No! You’re okay...observant but okay. Just suddenly feel at a disadvantage.” He said still aware he was standing and because his father had taught him manners he held out his hand in greeting.

The customer took it warmly in hers and shook “I’m Minerva.” She smiled.

“Like the Goddess?” asked Bryan.

“Yes! Just like the goddess.” She replied.

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