

TUESDAY NIGHT AT THE CHESTNUT STREET LIBRARY

story by Stephanie Waxman

SYLVIA PUT DOWN THE *School Library Journal* and absent-mindedly looked across the room to where the afternoon sun was making a criss-cross pattern on the round table in the corner. There sat Bernie, dozing. She knew it must be four-thirty, the time he usually drifted off, the *Arcadia Tribune* in his lap. Her eyes wandered over to Felicity dusting H through J in Young Adult Fiction, moving in slow motion, no doubt counting the minutes until she could leave and go meet up with her boyfriend. It was quiet, very quiet, the way a library was supposed to be. But of late it got on her nerves. She sighed heavily. She'd grown weary of all these books. She was tired of looking at them, their covers worn and tattered, their pages yellow with age. She disliked the smell of them, even the new ones, though she rarely came into contact with new ones in this old library. She found it disagreeable to touch them, especially knowing how many grimy hands had pawed them. She was bored with the routine

of stamping the return date, entering it into the log and then placing it on the cart. And, more often than not, Felicity never got around to emptying the cart; Sylvia herself would have to place the books on the shelf.

At one time she had loved books. When she was a young girl nothing pleased her more than to simply hold a book. In fact, she never went anywhere without a book, reading at the bus stop, reading in the dentist's office, reading while waiting for a bowl of soup at the Tick Tock coffee shop. But thirty-eight years at the Chestnut Street Library had worn away her affection. Standing here behind the counter she felt oppressed by the hundreds, no, thousands of books stacked like a terrible army all around her. Each book represented one man's story — and lately, in these last few decades, a fair number of women's stories as well: story of how it was, story of how it could be, story of why. The density of it made her tired.

And no one really used the library anymore. Teenagers certainly didn't congregate here to do homework. Mothers might hurry in and haul out a pile of picture books, but they didn't linger. They borrowed the tried and true: *The Cat in the Hat*, *Good Night Moon*, *The Little Engine That Could*. They didn't take time to examine more recent acquisitions.

When she was first made head librarian — when Gladys Mitchell finally retired — it was a moment of pride and celebration. Her dear mother and father sent a bouquet of red carnations. Mr. Clifford of the main branch had bothered with a phone call of congratula-

tions, and even that young man who worked part-time...what was his name? Jeffrey? Walter? had taken her out for an ice-cream sundae. It had all boded so well. It had seemed like the beginning of something.

She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, pausing a moment to enjoy the comfort of looking at nothing, wondering vaguely what she would do for dinner — stand in line at the Westward Ho or drive through for a Big Mac? The evening stretched before her with so little promise.

“Ma’am?”

The husky male voice made her eyes snap open. His form was blurry and she squinted to bring him into focus before realizing that her glasses were off. She put them on quickly and stared at the short, small-boned man standing before her. He might have been 40, maybe younger. He wore a baseball cap turned backwards and a t-shirt that said LET’S DANCE.

“May I help you?”

“Pornography,” he said simply, as if it were a medical term.

She felt her face grow warm and averted her eyes. “I believe an adult bookstore is what you’re looking for.”

“I want porn with class,” he said with a slight accent. His face was sharply chiseled, Puerto Rican or perhaps Spanish. She wondered if he really did like to dance. Something about his slight build, the way he moved his hands when he spoke, she could imagine him moving to music. She had a brief memory of her mother and father doing the foxtrot in the small kitchen in their Brooklyn apartment.

He wanted “porn with class.” If she showed him books of an erotic nature she feared what he might do — take the book to the little table at the end of the Periodicals aisle where he couldn’t be seen, and later she’d find the pages stuck together — the thought revolted her. She looked at him more closely. He was clean-shaven and his shirt was tucked neatly into his pants. He was waiting patiently for her answer. There was an earnestness about him. Perhaps he was doing research or taking a class. Maybe it had to do with dancing somehow. She made a decision.

“Follow me.” She led him upstairs to the section that held books on erotic art. “These books can’t leave the library,” she said, “but I imagine you’ll find what you want.”

He smiled gratefully as he reached for a large volume of Japanese prints. He laid it carefully on the table.

She stood in the narrow aisle and felt awkward, disappointed that their exchange was over. She thought of pursuing a conversation, but his attention was already on a large color reproduction of an 18th-century scroll which showed a man penetrating a woman as she leaned against a step near her bath, her hair cascading down her back, her red kimono spread out around her.

Sylvia felt herself become aroused and was perplexed, then dismayed. She quickly backed away, watching as he lowered himself into a chair. He removed his cap and ran his fingers through his hair.

She came downstairs, returning to her post behind the counter. Bernie had left, gone back to his apartment

in time for Meals on Wheels. Felicity was at the end of the P's. Sylvia glanced at the large clock by the door. Twenty minutes until closing time. She picked up the *School Library Journal* but couldn't concentrate. She was agitated and distracted.

She wondered if he'd gotten to the East Indian art, the dance of tongues and genitals. She thought of the frieze at Khajuraho, which showed couples engaged in ecstatic sexual unions. Or, perhaps he was looking at Rembrandt's etching of the monk copulating with a peasant in the field. Maybe he'd found the Chinese lovers supporting themselves with the help of a sling, or the 19th century French orgy scene done in pastels with...

"Can I leave early, Sylvia?" Felicity's voice crashed into the orgy scene. She was leaning against the door, her purse already slung across her shoulder. "Rick got a new truck and..."

"Yes, yes, go on," Sylvia said, annoyed.

With Felicity gone, the only sound was the slow tick of the big wall clock. She surveyed the empty room. She'd spent two-thirds of her life in this old library — its prisoner. Her hand drifted up to her blouse and fiddled with the top button. Slowly, she made her way to the door and locked it.

He had several books open, spread out on the table.

"Excuse me," she said, but he didn't look up. He was deeply engrossed, leaning on his elbows, his head supported by his hands. His hair was thick and black. She could see the shape of his body through the t-shirt.

Though a small man, he was muscular and his hands were large and strong looking. She imagined how they would feel around her waist. She felt herself redden. Her heart began to race and then the words flew out of her mouth.

“I wonder if...with the dancing and all...”

He glanced up.

Her voice was high, like a schoolgirl's. “Do you know how to do the foxtrot?”

He looked puzzled, then realized she was looking at his shirt. He smiled and his eyes brightened. “You like the dance?”

She glanced down, avoiding his gaze and the way it made her skin tingle. She saw one of the pictures he'd been looking at. Even upside down, she recognized the German lithograph of a gypsy taking a girl from behind.

“Which one you like? Merengue, rumba, mambo, salsa? In Cuba we dance everything.”

She looked at him.

His eyes were bright and eager, “I teach you, yes?” He jumped up and came toward her. She smelled his minty breath. He was very near. Her heart pounded wildly.

“We need music,” he said, his voice animated.

On shaky legs she led him down the stairs over to the round hook rug where the children sat for Story Hour. There was a radio/tape deck on a low shelf. He moved quickly into action — sweeping the area clear of little tables and chairs, rolling back the rug, then tuning the radio to a Spanish station. He listened for a moment, and then began to move, his hips gyrating to the beat.

He held out his arms. They were the color of almonds.

She walked to him slowly and stood facing him. He was almost a head shorter than she was. She took a deep breath and stood still. Then she felt the slight pressure of his hand at her back. It gave her confidence and suddenly she began to move. When the song finished, he still held her, looking up into her eyes with a penetrating gaze, until a new one began. Then they were doing the samba, then the salsa, and then the cumbia. She followed him effortlessly. Once in awhile he would say “quick-quick-slow” or “the hips must relax.” The Latin rhythms moved her, quite literally. She abandoned herself to the music. Her feet skipped, her hips swayed, she twirled under his arm, then felt his hand again at her waist. The room of books spun around her.

The afternoon light had long since faded when she finally collapsed against one of the little chairs, breathless, laughing, her clothes in disarray, her hair damp against her forehead. The music continued to pulsate. He did a dance for her, jumping onto one of the little tables, doing a pirouette, then landing in front of her, feet planted wide apart, arms thrust above his head in a gesture of triumph. She clapped and laughed as he took a deep bow.

“A wonderful day!” he exclaimed. He gave her a kiss on her cheek and then danced his way out the door.

Sylvia got up slowly in a lighthearted daze. She smoothed out the rug, arranged the tables and chairs in their proper places. Then, she wandered the cavernous

room in her stocking feet. The radio still played and she did a little quick-quick-slow as she poked through Adult Fiction. She picked up a dog-eared copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. As a young woman she had read and reread all the naughty parts. Then she spotted *Fathers and Sons* and remembered, with a knowing smile, the sensual play on another rug in another era. She roamed up and down the aisles collecting volumes: *Madame Bovary*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Delta of Venus*. It was close to midnight when she finally stopped and stuffed them into her tote bag.

She turned off the radio, put on her shoes, and switched off the lights. Then she stood for a moment in the quiet darkness. She felt as if the books were applauding the reckless outing she'd taken, bowing to her spontaneous behavior. They were her witness each day, watching her go through the mechanics of living. Now they had seen another side.