

Finalist, Fiction

The Book-Safe  
By Julie Thorndyke

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“So sorry, it’s water-damaged.” I tried to turn the customer away from the oak-balustraded staff area, back to the loaded book shelves.

“No, really... it doesn’t matter! I can’t find that novel anywhere, it’s not in the public library or the university...I’ve scoured all the other bookshops. I don’t mind at all... can still read it, water-damage or not.” She was adamant, persistent, pushy. There is nothing, I have found, as self-important as a thwarted reader.

“It is against shop policy,” I lied, “to sell anything in a sub-standard condition. And customers are definitely not allowed in the work-area...rules about health and safety.”

She looked, greedily, through her rectangular crimson-framed glasses at the book clamped firmly in the book-binders’ press. The large gilt title was clearly visible, wedged in the hefty press, amongst a litter of linen binding thread, real-bristle brushes in jam-jars, and pots of specialist glue. I have suggested to Dora, more than once, that a partition wall instead of the waist-height oak barrier might provide more privacy. But no, according to my boss, the old-fashioned book press and binding tools add an air of authenticity, even gravitas, to the shop atmosphere. The gold letters on the book-spine mocked me with their recently cleaned brilliance: “One All Hallows Eve” by E.M. Finch.

Then came the inevitable phrase, delivered in a measured, unemotional but strong voice with just the hint of a smirk: “I would like to speak with the manager.”

I was ready: oh yes, I have dealt with enough difficult people to know how the script goes. “So sorry, the manager is away on a buying trip,” I intone with just the right practised-pitch of regret, control and honeyed firmness.

Her frustration betrayed her by an infinitesimal twitch of the mouth, a toss of the well-groomed head. She handed me an embossed business card from the depths of her velvet patchwork tote. “Hold that book for me. Have the manager call me the moment he returns.” She grasped a brochure from the stand beside the cash register. “What was your name?” she enquired loudly, having just noticed the small wires curving into my ears.

“Rupert,” I lied. “I’m the only Deaf employee here, so the boss will know who you are complaining about.”

She turned and retreated across our well-patinated, wide timber floorboards, which squeak loudly at just the right places to let you know when a customer is browsing the tall forest of bookshelves. I have no trouble at all picking up both the sound and the vibrations. If truth be told, a customer is at much more risk of injury between those heavily loaded stacks than in the work-area, with its bench in front of the window looking over the sunny, cobbled laneway. Such a pleasant spot for a morning coffee.

I had been sipping just such a coffee yesterday morning, while unpacking a shipment of books. It was a slow weekday—not much passing trade and no bus tours expected. We are one antiquarian bookshop in a town of many bookshops: a concentration of similar establishments, popular with bus-trips and book-lovers, arts-festival attendees and writers’ workshops held in local venues. But it is the off-season, and the boss really is away buying books. I didn’t tell that woman that I am the live-in lover of the boss as well as her right-hand man. She won’t get any

satisfaction from my darling Dora. I can see us chuckling over a bottle of lovely pinot noir one evening when Dora is home again, as I stroke her well-rounded hip in front of the wood-fire. In the meantime, I am master of all I survey.

But it is still my job to unpack boxes, dust off books bought in job-lots, and sort the trash from the saleable items. The box I unpacked yesterday morning was a mixed bunch: somebody's deceased estate. A miscellaneous collection of textbooks and novels, inspirational self-help works and poetry packed directly from shelf to cardboard carton. Birthday cards, shopping lists and the odd local newsletter were interleaved with the book pages. These items of serendipity could be much more interesting than the books themselves, in a batch like this. I often find myself reconstructing the lives of previous book owners from the detritus they have left behind in their reading matter. There might be a spare passport photo used as a bookmark: which lends the imaginative exercise an undeserved flavour of integrity. It was such a morning yesterday, customer-less and leisurely, and I drank a full pot of good coffee while sifting through the musty piles.

There were a few good, classic novels we could sell; a vintage street directory a local artist would be interested in for collage; the poetry was mostly unknown to me. I put those slim tomes aside for Dora to look at. There was a chunky hardback, battered and insect-eaten down the edges. It didn't look worth saving. I checked all the other items for signs of infestation, but they were clean. Nothing worse for a bookshop than introducing mould or pests. Paper, for all its usefulness, is a vulnerable material. It burns easily, water ruins it, insects love to feast on it. Paper tears, creases, and browns with age. So like a human body: maybe that is why we love our books as we do.

The damaged novel looked like the sort of epic I enjoyed as a teenager. Black and white maps on the endpapers, lists of characters, family-trees and many, many chapters. Just the thing to while away the night hours in Dora's absence. I opened it and flipped through...an irregular, vermin-eaten hole lay right smack in the middle of the volume. I tossed it into the bin.

I closed the store and walked to the pub. With Dora away, I'd have a snack meal this evening. A hot lunch appealed.

Dora is the world to me. Ever since that first day I wandered into her bookshop, and saw the "Help Wanted" sign, she's been my everything. After my arts degree I had searched for work, but everything always led to teaching, and who could face explaining, year after year, to each new group of noisy children in each new class, about Deafness and my cochlear implants? Amuse them with the rudiments of British Sign Language (BSL) and then do it all again the next year? No thanks. A library studies diploma gave me various skills. But libraries are closing down all over Britain: hard enough for employed librarians to keep their jobs, let alone start a new career. Which left me in Lower Woerking-on-Tyne, browsing Dora's shop. When she signed "hello" in BSL it was a lifeline thrown out to a drowning sailor.

Yes, Dora is my world. But how nice sometimes, to walk down the street with money in your pocket, go into the pub and buy a counter-lunch? Shout the men conversing there a round and enjoy their company? I did enjoy it. But after an hour, cheered by the ale, I went back to work.

I cleaned and priced those saleable recent arrivals, added them to the stock list. I dusted (yes, dusted) the front counter, adjusted the brochures and bookmarks. I chose some enticing art books and changed the window display to surprise Dora. A

painting course was scheduled at the local arts centre—might pull in some passing trade. Then I made tea and sat at the work bench to sort out the mending pile. I did a bit of judicious excising of blank pages scribbled on with green wax crayon at the end of a classic edition “Winnie the Pooh”. It’d sell on the specials table. I reglued a cover on a dictionary and sewed up a loose Shakespeare with linen thread. I’m quite good at this, Dora is pleased with me – she hasn’t the patience for repairs.

The bell over the shop-door tinkled; the small warning-light flashed above my worktable.

It was Bob, from the arts centre with whom I had seen earlier in the pub. “I have something you’ll appreciate, Davey,” he whispered. “The missus being away, and all that.” He pulled out a bag of pot. “Best grade, special price, just for you.”

Bob, crafty devil, knew I was in charge of the till that day. But I didn’t take the necessary cash from the drawer. I took out my own wallet and paid the man. That the money was a bit extra I’d been saving to surprise Dora at Christmas, was neither here nor there. Something would turn up.

Looking around for a safe place to put the weed, my eyes landed on the book in the wastebasket. I retrieved it, picked up my sharp blade and began enlarging the cavity in the middle of the book. One ear cocked for the sound of the bell, one eye on the warning-light, I worked steadily through the afternoon. It was satisfying work, carving words from an overstuffed novel full of its own importance. Or so it seemed, as I tried out one of Bob’s joints. When the hollow was complete, I took a brush and glue, began sticking together the rim of pages. It was long after official closing time when I finished, clamped the book holding the remaining weed into the book press, and wound the screws tight. I did not know it would cause me such grief the next day.

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“There is a letter,” said Dora a week later, “from a Dr Eunice Partridge. Who says she is researching E.M. Finch, and that you refused to sell her the last remaining copy in England of that author’s book, ‘One All Hallows Eve.’ What say you?”

I signed something very rude behind Dora’s back.

“I saw that!” she exclaimed, looking at my reflection in the shop window. “You forget my father was Deaf.”

Bless his soul, that Deaf father is probably the reason Dora takes so much interest in me. I thank my lucky stars for him every day.

“I’m sorry. I love you,” I signed. I hugged her from behind, kissed her neck.

She read on. “Your shop-assistant, going by the name of Rupert...” and here she giggled, because I had been musing over a second-hand copy of Rupert Bear that first day in her shop, and it is her pet name for me—“Rupert insisted that the book is water-damaged and unable to be sold. May I offer to pay double the recommended retail price (which I have ascertained from Amazon even though there is no stock with that supplier)...” and here Dora herself swore, because she abhors Amazon above all else, “for that damaged copy which is the only one I have been able to locate. I am unable to finish my research on E.M. Finch (a student and friend of Tolkien) without this text. Yours sincerely, ...”

“So where is it?” asked Dora. “Where is this damnable book?”

“I threw it out.”

“Threw it out? When she asked you to hold it?”

“I didn’t know she seriously needed it. It didn’t look special. There must be some others around?”

“Libraries have weeded their collections to death, collectors concentrate on antiquities... less popular authors just haven’t been archived.”

“I thought she would just go away. You know. People say they will return but never do. I had the book in the press, I was trying to save it, but it was insect-infested, foxed, damp and mouldy...it smelt. So I threw it away.”

“The shop isn’t doing so well, you know,” Dora said.

“I’m sorry. I make mistakes...you shouldn’t leave me in charge.”

“No sense in crying over spilt milk,” said Dora gently. “Is that the time? I’m meant to be the auction. Open the shop for me, love?”

“Sure,” I replied. But first, I took my improvised book safe, with its illegal contents, from the drawer where I had hidden it. I wrapped it in a dust jacket borrowed from a similar-sized book. It fitted well. I stowed the book in the middle of the mending pile.

To ease my conscience, I took out a pile of catalogues from other booksellers, and trawled their lists for another copy of “One All Hallows Eve”. It was a thankless task.

Dora returned and sat at her desk to deal with her special orders.

“I was sure this first edition had a dust-jacket,” said Dora. “Did you see it? The buyer only wants it if complete with original cover.”

“I took it off to remove some old sticky-tape,” I improvised. “Give it here, I can find the cover.”

Some tourists came in. Dora chatted about village landmarks and sold the women some postcards; showed the men some maps and books on local history. I

whisked out the dust-jacket and replaced it on the first edition. I wrapped my secret book-safe in brown paper, addressed it to myself. Don't ask me why. Perhaps a memory of some B-grade crime film. I really don't know.

"Just going out to the post-office," I called.

It was good to walk around. I was relieved to have the weed out from under Dora's nose. She would freak if she found it. I wouldn't upset darling Dora for all the world.

"There you are, Rupert-Bear," she smiled as I entered the shop. "I'm making cocoa. Want some?"

Fortified with hot cocoa I checked Amazon (Dr P was right, no stock and a hideous recommended retail price), The Book Depository, every supplier in the business. Everywhere, I drew a blank. There had only been one small print-run of this novel. J.R.R. Tolkien himself had written the introduction. I could see why Dr P had been desperate.

At last, at long, long last, a second-hand bookseller's website showed two available copies. I jumped out of my seat in excitement and grabbed Dora's credit-card, purchased both copies, with express shipping. One copy was in New Zealand, another in California. I breathed a sigh of relief.

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A deluge of orders came in before Christmas. My table was covered with piles of work. Short of cash, having wasted money on that dope, I worried how to buy something nice for Dora. She decorated the shop in Dickensian style, with frosted

window-panes and holly around the shelves. She sent out invitations to partake in mince pies and mulled-wine on Christmas Eve. Dora does nothing by halves.

My Dad rang: my sister and her brood were coming for Christmas. Dora and I prefer a quiet visit with just my parents—a mixture of BSL, spoken word, and laughter. My parents had seen me devotedly through the challenges of childhood: were relieved, if surprised, to see me settle down with an older woman.

“We are much too busy,” I replied. “But would love to come in the New Year.”

“See you then, son,” replied Dad. “Mum sends love, and says there is something in the post.”

On Christmas Eve, I was sorting through a deluge of mail, while Dora warmed her spicy brew. In one package, I found a woollen scarf knitted by my mother, and card with two hundred pounds taped inside. In another, the New Zealand copy of “One All Hallows Eve.”

“Eureka!” I shouted. “Call Dr Partridge in a pear tree. Her book arrived.”

“Parcel it up,” directed Dora. “And race down to the post-office.” She went to adjust the fairy-lights strung around the outside tables.

I opened another parcel: it was the book I had posted to myself, containing illegal contents. I compared it with the book from NZ. Identical. A customer came in wanting “A Christmas Carol.” He spent ages comparing the three available copies in the shop. I sweetened him with some of Dora’s mulled wine: he bought the most expensive copy. Pleased with myself, I went back to my table, opened another package. The Californian book had also arrived.

I invoiced to Dr Partridge for the cost of both books plus a mark-up and shipping costs. Enclosing our shop Christmas card, I wrapped up the books, wound

my new scarf around my neck, and jogged to the post-office, kissing Dora on the cheek as I passed.

I went to the jeweller and bought the antique diamond pin Dora had been eyeing for months. I bought champagne and chocolate truffles, took them home and put them all under our small Christmas tree.

We closed the shop late on Christmas Eve. The mince pies were all eaten and the mulled-wine enjoyed. We put up the closed sign and went home to our cosy flat to hibernate. It snowed: for the first time ever, I surprised Dora with a decent present. We didn't re-open the shop until after going to Devon.

I had forgotten all about my stash of weed. Back at my worktable I looked for the book-safe in vain. It was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh..." said Dora as she cleared away a piece of forgotten mistletoe, "that book for Dr Partridge, that extra one on your table. It looked a bit ratty, but I sent it off to her with the option to keep or return."

"...what?"

"I sent off the extra copy."

"But why?"

"Not likely to sell it to anyone else."

I waited for the inevitable letter to arrive. I snaffled it from the mail-bag as soon as I saw the envelope bearing Dr Partridge's name. It read:

*Dear Rupert and Dora,*

*Thank you for the copies of "One All Hallows Eve" by E.M. Finch which came by recent post. Please find herein a cheque for the invoiced amount.*

*I appreciate the extra effort you have made to secure these books for me.*

*The enclosure was especially enjoyable: did all your customers receive this special holiday treat?*

*With thanks,*

*Dr Eunice Partridge.*

“What does she mean?” asked Dora.

“...the Christmas card?”

“Strange way to put it.”

“Does it matter? Look at the size of the cheque!” I kissed Dora and made a cheeky suggestion in sign. Her reply was totally satisfactory.