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My Mother's Planned Parenthood: A Book Sale Elegy

My mother and I love each other dearly, and, to be clear, we are both capable Christmas gift-givers in many respects. Ceramic chicken knick-knacks and matching salt and pepper shakers never fail to bring an additional gleam to Mom's keen antiquer's eye, brightening the tree's particolored twinkles already refracted there. But when it comes to the gifting of books—my reputation, I suppose earned, as the family bookworm having rendered a volume or two an obligatory accent note to the overall holiday package—it would be fair to say that difficulties have historically emerged.

The annual family ritual of Christmas unwrapping has, like any drama, its highs and lows, the distribution of which rests largely in the hands of fate. Who unwraps what and when is to some degree manipulable, though, through guesswork based on consideration of a given parcel's shape and heft. My mother, ever the antigrinch and consequently maestro of all Christmas proceedings, has the habit—or so I have long suspected her, but never directly accused (until now: hi, Mom!)—of encouraging the unwrapping of visibly bookish items in the immediate afterglow of a showcase gift, getting them painlessly over with while the upscale sweater serotonin, the kitchen gizmo dopamine, yet course through our filiated veins. By careful application of this method might the unwanted book, that squat prism of disappointment, be safely grinned and borne.

Relations on this front reached a memorable nadir the year that I, in the fever of now-or-never mid-December spending (but soft, O Wallet!), had the clever idea of commemorating my mother's then-recent betrothal with a bilingual copy of Pablo Neruda's much beloved *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. My mother, after all, is a person of powerful feelings, and these were lyrics of immortal passion; plus the book is short, so giving it

to someone doesn't feel like assigning homework—such was my logic. I had neglected to consider the extent to which the immortal passion I was just mentioning is rendered through an eroticism fit to startle Madonna. Amid my mother's post-unwrapping lather of performed gratitude, she opened to the slender volume's opening poem (entitled, I am afraid, "Body of a Woman") and read aloud its translated opening stanza: "Body of a woman, white hills, white thighs, / you look like a world, lying in surrender. / My rough peasant's body digs in you..."—but enough! The conscience balks at the very act of transcription. Only staunch homosexuality, long ago disclosed (and lovingly accepted by the people who count), spared me that dark Christmas day from the lasting stain of insinuated Oedipality. Thumbing through my own copy now summons the ghost of that day's blush.

Books gifted by my mother to me, on the other hand, are marked less by outrageous infelicity than by their conscription in a sustained campaign to cheer her habitually grim child. As with Waterloo and the Napoleonic retreat from Moscow, there is an admirable grandeur to the campaign's failure. A snow-white Yorkshire terrier stares me down now—eyes beady, ears perked—from behind the shop window on the cover of this year's volley: *Christmas by the Book* by Anne Marie Ryan. The novel tracks a wholesome couple who have for decades co-owned a bookshop, the budget of which features all too much red and all too little green. Will Nora, Simon, and their handsome mutt meet with a fiscal Christmas miracle?

I confess that I haven't read it and found out. I may well never. I believe on absolute terms in everyone else's ability to read it, but it doesn't seem like my thing. Yet I won't be depositing it, or any of my mother's other stalwart attempts at connection, in the Little Free Library down the block from me¹. When I look at my stack of books she's gifted me—their spines

¹ This despite my own wildly unbalanced account, as lendeer more than lender, with the aggregate Little Free Libraries of the region.

uniform in their telltale smoothness—I think not of whatever thoughts they contain but of the thought, loving and almost aching earnest, that went into selecting them. This in turn makes me think of the uncounted hours she spent in the robin’s-egg rocking chair in the corner of my childhood bedroom, reading to me books whose pictures shrank with time and whose word counts slowly mounted. Then, I imagine the turn from *reading to* toward *reading with*: her patient endurance of my inaugural soundings-out, clumsy cracks at what has proved to be the most central activity of my life.

Above all, though, I think of the gasoline and afternoons she would burn, twice annually, on trips to the spring and autumn editions of the Planned Parenthood Book Sale at the Iowa State Fairgrounds in Des Moines. From elementary school onward, I would anticipate these adventures with a near-hysterical intensity, such that come the morning of, it took all my mother’s might to still her giddy pilgrim. Promotional materials proudly and, to my knowledge, correctly proclaimed the sale the largest of its kind in the Midwest. It certainly looked the part: at each sale, the high ceilings and iron girdworks of the fairgrounds’ 4-H Building became resplendent with seemingly endless card-table arcades of donated books on every topic imaginable, the sale of which went to benefit Planned Parenthood of Iowa’s sex education programs.

The ample and amiable daylight streaming into the building’s sole enormous room, exposing the ballet of constellated dustmotes that arose over the day’s airing of pages heretofore long closed, conspired with the iron to remind me—in middle school now, and suffering early-onset Anglophilia—of the Crystal Palace of London, built to host the Great Exhibition of 1851. Like that vast Palace, I thought, here was my state’s very own citadel of humane learning, the collection of which, were it to be cataloged, I imagined would plumb new depths of the

Dewey decimal system. And the bargain rates at which its books were sold made their knowledge within true reach of the general public, my blue-collar family included.

Knowing more now about the British Empire than I did in middle school, I realize I was naive about the Crystal Palace—but I learned this in part through Planned Parenthood acquisitions, which included both my first Joseph Conrad and my first Chinua Achebe. (My Norton *Heart of Darkness* contains a critical essay by a scholar who, as it happened, I would cherish coming to know in the flesh a decade later.) It was apt, too, that the sale supported sex education efforts, in light of the sex ed regimen I received *à la carte* from book sale finds during high school, and not always from the expected quarters. Yes, there was Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a novel of incarcerated gay love that “wove” together my burgeoning sense of self with my admiration for political dissidence and my loathing of prisons. But there was also a Penguin copy of *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, whose ecstatic episodes of divine encounter still speak to me about the embodied life as intensely as anything else I've read. Then there was Borges, to this day my model of an ideal reader, and Simon Leys, whose life is my favorite demonstration of how a critic can be boldly generalist in subject matter without sacrificing rigor, and political without neglecting particularity and texture. Then came Elizabeth Bishop. And Herman Melville. (I have a whale tattoo to prove that one.) I was too promiscuous a bibliophile, and the books were too cheap, for me to render a thorough catalog.

After more than six decades, Planned Parenthood of Iowa held its last book sale in October. The state chapter sorely needs its legal budget, and found that it could maximize that budget through sale of the warehouse used to process book donations. My mother told me this news when I was home for Christmas, as it happens, during the annual unwrapping. It was not a

dramatic moment, and conversation swiftly moved on—but I was left lost in thought, and in gratitude, as I picked up my next compact, rectangular package.

Emblematic Christmas Book Given (and Separately Owned by Me)

Neruda, Pablo. *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. Penguin, 1969.

Emblematic Christmas Book Received (Still Owned by Me)

Ryan, Anne Marie. *Christmas by the Book: A Novel*. Putnam, 2020.

Touchstone Books Acquired at the Planned Parenthood Book Sale

Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979*. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1990.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *A Personal Anthology*. Grove Press, 1967.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. W.W. Norton, 1988.

Leys, Simon. *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays*. NYRB Classics, 2011.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick: or, The Whale*. Modern Library, 2000.

Puig, Manuel. *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Vintage International, 1991.

Teresa of Ávila. *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*. Penguin Classics, 1957.