

The Last Thing I'll Ever Read

I used to read the weirdest, most absurd stuff I could find. If it were about little girls who could eat something and then read the mind of the person who cooked it, or messianic women with no belly button, I would read it. There were times I'd want to read about oracular men who could magically cure misaligned spinal columns. Other times I'd like a story about hypochondriacs trying to shelter themselves with saran wrap.

As you can imagine, what I liked to read and what my teachers assigned weren't one and the same. That's not to say my parents would have been any more appreciative if I made straight A's. I don't think they wanted kids at all. Whenever I was around them, they'd list Bobby Maguire's latest accomplishments in sports, or Carole Singer's magnificent entrepreneurship. Bobby and Carole were among the many of their friends' more outgoing kids.

I suspect it was some covert way of urging me to hurry up and finish school so I could get out of their lives. Fine by me. I didn't want to be around them much, either. All I wanted to do was bury myself in my books and be left alone.

I was sitting through a lecture on the surviving wives of Henry VIII one day when I started to get sick. At first it was only fever symptoms - aches around my neck and shoulders, sensations far too hot and cold at the same time - but as the day moved forward, everything started to sound muffled. A general numbness overtook my ability to feel anything whatsoever. The worst part? It happened to be a Friday. I wouldn't get any days off from school. I'd have to spend all weekend feeling miserable, and probably be feeling okay enough to come back Monday.

Well... I thought that would be the worst of it. I didn't go out that much on the weekend anyways, so it really didn't make that much of a difference. When I got home, I fixed a snack of Cheetos and Pepsi so I could go to my room and read. Once I laid my eyes on the page, though, they began watering. My eyes stung with the effort of trying to distinguish the words through my sudden tears. Wiping them away only worked so long as I didn't look at the page at all. After five minutes of fighting it, I gave up. I'd just have to find out why the house was bigger on the inside some other day. All I could do now was change into my pajamas and pout until I was healthy again.

For two long days, I just lay on my bed, waiting for something to happen. That is, something besides me losing more and more contact with my sight, hearing, and sense of touch. I don't even know if my parents took me to the doctor. I felt like I was baking beneath my own skin. I even started to wonder if I'd died, and for the rest of eternity I'd be left with nothing but this stuffy furnace feeling and lonely, regretful thoughts.

My recovery was instantaneous. I say that with no exaggeration. I did not gradually regain my sight or hearing, I just woke up one morning without feeling a trace of fever. At worst, I was feeling very thirsty. That is, until mom came in and told me to get dressed. Then I felt very disappointed.

"But Mom," I pleaded. "I've been sick all weekend long. I'm can't to go back until a doctor clears me."

She glowered at me. "Do they have a nurse up there or not? Get dressed."

I rolled my eyes. "At least it'll be quiet at school," I murmured.

I always took a copy of something fun to read in between my classes. After I got dressed and packed my textbooks, I reached for the book I'd been reading.

What I saw was solid proof that my parents had been in my room.

The page was turned to a place where they'd scribbled over the text and written their complaints about me, something about my being a social cripple, much unlike Kenny Kenneth who volunteered to help build homeless shelters.

I didn't give a damn about Kenny or his do-gooding. I flipped back to see just how far they'd started. I kid you not, every last page was like this. On the first page, they wrote, "There was once a teenager who read all of the wrong things. He was a shut-in and a disappointment to his parents. You could tell who he was based on his blonde hair, brown eyes, and almond-shaped face."

Something akin to microwaved silverware started sparking in my mind. I marched to the kitchen and waved the book in front of my mom's face.

"You had no right to come in and deface my book."

She was drinking coffee and reading off her phone when I said this. The caffeine had already taken effect, given the look in her wide eyes. I can only describe it as lethal indignation, but I wasn't backing down.

"I get so sick I can't even see or hear, and this is what you do?"

She brushed aside the book, that "how dare you" expression never wavering. "There was once a teenager who read all of the wrong things. He was a shut-in-

"You already told me that." I pointed at the book. "I swear, you'll pay for-

"He was a shut-in!" She shouted with such force that I took a step back and knocked over the creamer on the cabinet.

"He was a shut-in!" She repeated, pushing past me to rescue what she could of the creamer. As she seized a paper towel roll, she proceeded to recite, "And a disappointment to his parents. You could tell who he was..."

I didn't stick around. Something was very off about the way she was shouting. The inflection with which she spoke didn't match what she was saying. The scene was so surreal with her shouting at me that I was no longer angry. Or I was still angry, but the bewilderment mixed in with it made me frightened. All I knew was that I needed to get away.

All the way on my walk to school, I couldn't shake the bizarre scenario. I regretted not grabbing more of my books. No doubt she'd go and vandalize them as well while she had the opportunity.

I sat in math class staring forlornly at the wall until Mr. Lynch came in and told us to take out our textbooks. I opened mine, not to any coordinate grid or algebraic equation, but to foreboding signs Mom and Dad had gone after every last book in my room.

It was the same thing about me being a shut in, describing my face, and adding a few other details, before mentioning some supposedly successful peer of mine. I pulled out my history textbook to see if they'd also got a hold of that, but Mr. Lynch caught me.

"Hey, I don't see you solving anything," he said. "I want to see you after class."

This inspired a lot of snickering and cooing. I got out my notebook, but that had been invaded and tarnished in the same way my books had.

"Is this why your test scores are always sub-par?" demanded Mr. Lynch once the rest of the class had gone.

"I swear, I didn't do this." I opened up the middle of my math textbook to show him what my parents had done. "That's not my handwriting. It's..." but come to think of it, I wasn't even sure whether it belonged to my mom or my dad. I can't remember ever seeing any handwritten notes from either of them.

I watched his face for some inkling of understanding or pity. All I saw was confusion and frustration. I should have known he wouldn't accept what happened as an excuse.

"There was once a teenager who read all of the wrong things."

It was as if my stomach split open at the base, spilling all my insides onto the floor. I looked back at the book. What was written there had nothing to do with my being a disappointment. It was a graphic description of my sexual interests.

"He was a shut-in and a disappointment to his parents."

Just like with my mom, all of his words were misaccentuated. The rhythm and tone of it resembled some other sentence. He pointed out the door, and I wondered if he was telling me to go to the principal's office or just to leave.

I nodded and walked away. As I left, he recited the line about how to identify me. I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, now insecure about the rather feminine shape of my face.

I had anthropology and American literature before my lunch break. Both of those being lecture classes, I could take the time to read the newly scribbled contents. I dreaded seeing anything as personal as my private fantasies. These fears were well met.

There were incidents listed that only I ought to know. For example, it included the time I got so tired of being compared to other kids that I stole a glass lamb from one of my teachers' offices, smashed it, and dumped it into some kid's backpack. He got suspended for it, and I was never caught. There was another time I snuck into a neighbor's backyard, against their warnings, and tried to pet their dog. The dog bit me, and I was too ashamed to even cry. Again, this was something only I should have known about. Worst of all was this time when I was ten, I was setting up a tower of cards, a younger kid offered to help, I let him, but he knocked it over. I shouted at him and made him cry. His dad saw me and intervened by criticizing me for letting him help in the first place.

Rereading these memories wasn't far from reliving them. The only thing more excruciating would be hearing them recited by Mom or Mr. Lynch.

I naturally got home before my parents. I went through all my books, and indeed, each one had been scribbled over in marker so that the real text was no longer visible. The only way they could have done this in two days would have been if they'd recruited all their friends to help them. But then I started to wonder... was this something that had only happened to my own books?

I went through the house and checked every book I could. They were all the same; text marked out, narrative on my life written in between the lines. Everything from the newspaper to the cookbooks to the furniture catalogue was censored and replaced. There were a handful of carpentry books my dad had checked out from the library. They'd been given the same treatment.

Where do you go when you're surrounded by this kind of impossibility? I gave in to my morbid curiosity and continued reading. When the story wasn't comparing me to someone else or digging up awful memories, it was making predictions. It went as far as to bring up my weekend illness and then meander in the present tense.

"He got sick for a few days, so sick that he went deaf and blind. He'd never read anything he loved again, for his so-called recovery erased his ability to process written words. He considered marking over the passages so he could write his own version of events, and how sad it was for him to think he could go and change history. He thought about running away..."

I stopped reading when I realized that my mom was saying aloud the very words I was reading.

"Yes, it certainly would be nice to be Selena's parents," said my dad. "They must be very proud to have a child who placed first in those science contests."

"He wondered about other books at the library," said my mom. "There was a chance that whatever was going on hadn't happened to them, yet."

"Oh yes, he is doing well, isn't he? Started his own business. And at 16, too, Gary and Jennifer must be so excited."

I checked to see if my mom's words were identical to the book. Then I heard Dad rustle a newspaper. The next thing he said was this:

"But deep down, he knew it was hopeless. No written words would ever tell him anything except the pitiful, unredeemable truth."

I haven't read all the way to the end, but I've read enough to know what lies ahead. My life story will be written wherever there are words or letters. On traffic signs, billboards, maps, websites, even elevator buttons. I've seen a stop sign with the word "Stop" spray painted over and part of my own story etched in miniscule letters. Nobody else can see it, nor can they hear themselves or anyone else reciting it. Even things I write myself change to the story of my predicament the moment I blink.

I'll supposedly start seeing a guidance counselor, only for her to fall to pieces over our inability to communicate. I'll suggest using sign language, but that will only lead to further confusion and missed appointments. I'll end up institutionalized, completely disconnected to everyone, and begin my descent into hell. From there, all that lies in store is stagnation.

Am I afraid of going to hell? I don't know. From the sound of things, I'm already there.