

Categorically Speaking

I spotted a 433 propping open the door to the reading room. That's a German dictionary to most people. I'd been working in the library for 3 months now and had started thinking in the Dewey Decimal System. My friends called me a geek and I was happy enough to be categorised that way. Categories and order made me happy, which is why I was always first to volunteer to shelve the returned books. Whilst most people found it dull, it was my favourite part of the job: logical, neat and strangely therapeutic.

I was slotting the 433 back into its home when I spotted him for the third time that week. Most of the library visitors were easy to categorise - students looking for textbooks to help them with their studies; students looking for textbooks to help them finish an essay they'd left to the last minute (who looked very similar but moved a lot more quickly); parents introducing their children to the joys of reading; the elderly ladies who'd return one Mills & Boon book and check out another (plus sometimes a sneaky Jackie Collins too); the businessmen who'd sandwich a self-help book between the two most gory-sounding horror novels they could find, and so on. However, I'd been unable to categorise this one visitor. He'd come in most days and spend his time browsing the aisles. He'd pick up a book, read the back cover, read a few of the middle pages and then put it back.

He wouldn't just stick to one area of the library either – I'd spotted him in Fiction, I'd seen him in Travel, he was often in Psychology and I'm sure I once caught a glimpse of him in Pregnancy and Childbirth. He'd sometimes select a book that he'd then spend all day with in the reading room. However he never checked anything out. I

didn't even know if he had a library card. It simultaneously intrigued and irked me that I couldn't put him into a box. Not physically of course – that would be creepy rather than geeky.

On this particular morning he was sitting in one of the easy chairs on the first floor, engrossed in a book about Italian architecture. As I was due a break anyway, I grabbed the first 390 I saw (which turned out to be a book about Chinese death rituals) and sat down next to him. His tall gangly frame made it difficult for him to blend into his surroundings, but he tried to do it anyway; he was clearly uneasy with the company. However I did not let this deter me; I'd committed myself with my morbid choice of book and I was taking the plunge with the sometime-enemy of libraries; conversation.

“So have you been to Italy, or are you planning a trip?” I was pleased with my breezy opening, but he looked at me like I'd just murdered his parents, maybe in some way befitting of the ancient Chinese. “Or do you just like architecture?” I added, hoping to ease the awkwardness.

“Oh,” he murmured, his voice a little scratchy. “I just like reading”.

“Oh I see,” I lied. “You're in here a lot”.

“Yeah.”

This clearly wasn't going to be a conversation befitting the works of Shakespeare or Tennessee Williams or even Russell T Davies. I needed to be more Nancy Drew than Matilda.

"Do you not work?" As soon as the words left my mouth I feared he'd take offence, but surprisingly he smiled.

"Well, not in any traditional nine to five sense. I do odds and ends for friends and family, plus I design t-shirts that my brother sells online and at markets, so I make enough to get by, but I like spending most of my time here."

"Wow, so you've got your own business! That's pretty brave to do something like that."

He laughed, quietly. "I wouldn't say I had my own business. My brother handles all the accounts and anything managerial. I couldn't do anything like that. I'm not brave at all."

"I disagree. You must need a certain amount of bravery to do something with so little financial security. I like to know how much money I have coming in each month. I'm not good with uncertainty and disorder."

He smiled. "It's all about perspective. You seem quite outgoing, so you're probably unaware of the hidden discrimination that pervades the rat race."

This statement threw me.

“I don’t understand.”

He seemed almost triumphant to have confused me. “Well, what do all CEOs and people in jobs of real power have?”

“Erm... terrible fashion sense and a warped sense of humour?”

He smiled again. “Well, yes, maybe, but they’ll also all be extroverted, at least to some degree. You can’t be shy and run a company, it just doesn’t work.”

I considered this. “Well... yes, I suppose you’re right. But that doesn’t mean they were never shy or introverted. Maybe they overcame it.”

He looked offended. “You think it’s something that needs to be overcome? Like we’re inferior or disabled?”

“No! No, I didn’t mean that. But it can hold you back, right?”

“In business, yes, definitely. That’s my point: It’s discrimination. Introverted people are discriminated against within the job sector.”

“Well I don’t know about that...”

“I mean, how do you get a job in the first place? Interviews. You have to be put in a room with people you don’t know and asked questions you need to respond to

quickly, articulately and confidently, even though a lot of them tend not to relate to your ability to do the job and seem more designed at measuring how good you are at interviews. And then even if you do manage to get a job, what kind of prospects do you have? You want more challenging work to do and better pay wouldn't go amiss but the idea of going into management is like some kind of hell. You feel awkward enough just asking to borrow somebody else's stapler, so you'd hardly want to be responsible for dictating the entirety of somebody else's workload. But are there lots of jobs available at high levels with good pay that don't require too much in the way of people skills?"

I paused for a second. Partly because I wasn't sure if it was a rhetorical question and partly because I was in shock at having heard him say so much in one go.

"Well, no, I guess there aren't. But are there really that many people who'd want jobs like that?"

"I think there are, yes. But extraverts don't get that – they're not going to create jobs like that because it's an alien concept to them that anyone might want to do them. And even if they were created, they'd end up hiring the most outgoing people to do them, as that's what they'd be looking for in the interview. Extraverts dictate the way everything works because it's inherent in their nature. And introverts won't ever do anything about it because we're all way too shy."

I felt like my neat metaphorical boxes had all been emptied and the contents scattered across the floor.

“I don’t know what to say. ‘Sorry’?”

He laughed so loudly we got a vicious stare from one of the Mills & Boon brigade.

“You don’t need to apologise, it’s not your fault. And I’m sorry for ranting, it’s just a pet-hate.”

“Clearly! Although you don’t seem that shy to me....”

“Because I can speak to you one-on-one without turning bright red and running away?”

“Oh, I’m stereotyping right? Sorry, I tend to do that a lot. That’s why I wanted to talk to you in fact – I couldn’t pigeonhole you like I can with most of the library visitors. Why is it you spend so much time here?”

His creased brow flattened and his eyes lit up at the mention of the library. “Oh I’ve always loved libraries – so many words and ideas and facts and fantasies. I find it comforting just spending time here. I’ll pick up books and read a few pages, just to get some vague sense of the world contained within the cover, then I’ll move on to another, experiencing as many different thoughts and feelings as possible in a short space of time. Sometimes I’ll want to spend the day immersed in one particular world and then I’ll pop into the reading room and read from cover to cover. I know I could check these books out and read them at home but there are too many interruptions there – I prefer the serenity of the library. I mean you’re actually *expected* to be quiet here - it’s an introvert’s paradise!”

He grinned. I smiled. His love of the library was contagious. Although I'd always felt at home amongst the ordered shelves and I'd always loved the ethos of a place where you can borrow something and then bring it back, allowing other people to borrow it in turn in some kind of never ending cycle of shared appreciation, I'd never seen it in the way he did. I'd never stopped to appreciate the ambience or the escapism that could be found within the building itself.

As I tried to re-index my mind to allow for all this new data, I noticed an inebriated gentleman stagger up the stairs. He was being followed discreetly by Miles, our Journals expert and ad hoc security guy. The drunk wasn't causing any bother, aside from a very distinctive and unpleasant odour, but it was always best to keep an eye on them. Mostly they'd just come in to keep warm for a bit, but occasionally they'd scare a child or start talking to the cardboard cut-out of the Very Hungry Caterpillar. This particular one meandered towards Childcare, unzipped his fly and promptly urinated all over the floor. Miles quickly moved in to escort him out of the building whilst I leapt up to assess the damage. I was mortified to see that a stray book had fallen prey to his unfortunately timed call of nature. Instinctively I ran to fetch the mop from the cleaning cupboard. When I returned I saw that my introverted companion had pulled out his mobile phone and was taking a photo of the small yellow puddle and soggy paperback. He jumped slightly when he realised I'd caught him in the act.

"Sorry," he said, "I just wanted to capture the moment."

"Terrible isn't it? The sight of a ruined book must be really upsetting to you."

“Oh... yes, I suppose, but there’s something beautiful about the irony too.”

I felt stupid for having to ask. “What irony?”

“You didn’t notice which book it is he’s urinated on?”

I glanced down and saw ‘A parent’s guide to potty training’. I laughed. It’s not something I’d have even noticed if he hadn’t pointed it out – I was too focussed on getting everything clean and tidy again.

I felt a twinge of sadness at the thought that this guy kept himself hidden away from the world. I’d only spoken to him for a few minutes, but in that time he’d managed to challenge my preconceptions and viewpoint. I felt both awed and enlightened by him.

As I clocked the time and explained that I needed to get back to work, I watched him slink off towards the reading room. I’d not even asked his name. Not that it mattered; it wouldn’t help me to categorise him in any way. He didn’t fit in with any of the usual library crowd. In fact he was more like an embodiment of the library itself; quiet, calm, inspiring and full of knowledge and ideas. This was close enough to a category to ease my compulsive sense of order but far enough from one to make me feel like I’d grown as a person in some way.

I picked up the damp 649 and got back to work.