

Bright Lights, Warm Books
- a vignette -
by Mark Binder

"You can go to the library and find the book that changes your life."
—Ellen Schwartz

It was rainy, slushy and cold, though warm for a New England winter. The rubber soles of Joe's sneakers kept the chill away, but not completely. He strode up Hope Street as quickly as he could without getting out of breath.

Ever since he lost his job, he'd found himself more and more lost. He'd never thought of himself as a guy who was defined by his work, but now that he was part of the unemployment system, he wasn't so sure. It wasn't the money, although that was part of it. It was the pride, or maybe the feeling of certainty. As long as he showed up for work, he knew that every two weeks he'd get a check. Now that certainty was gone, and instead, he was dependent on the whims of government funds and State employees.

Stomping his feet to kick off a bit of snow, Joe shook his head. He'd done everything right—gone to school, gotten a college degree, stayed clean off drugs (mostly), and done his job. He'd been on time, hard working and diligent. He hadn't gossiped or played office politics. He put in extra hours when he'd had to, and didn't cheat on the expense accounts.

Now he was out in the cold, along with the other twenty percent of the company that had been downsized after the out-of-state corporate takeover.

It wasn't fair, but bellyaching about fairness didn't help. His father had broken that news to him after Joe had lost his brand-new fishing rod the first time he'd hooked a bluefish and hadn't been paying attention.

The rain began to pick up, and Joe felt the water running down his cheek like icy tears from above.

Ahead he saw the building and smiled. The Rochambeau Library was like his second home, and when he saw its distinctive stainless steel sign, old-fashioned old brick section and the boxy new wing, his heart began to lighten.

He walked up the wheelchair ramp, and tugged the door open in time to let an Orthodox Jewish woman with a headscarf and her three children (two in a double stroller) in ahead of him. She smiled a thanks, but didn't say a word. He shrugged, and waited until she'd folded the stroller and gone up the elevator before shaking himself like a dog to get most of the water off.

Up the stairs, he opened the next door and felt the warm comfort begin to fill his being.

Where to begin?

He glanced to his left and saw that the computers were full. He glanced to his right and saw that the new books shelves were fairly bare. Funding problems everywhere.

A drink of water at the fountain, and then a warm washing of his face in the bathroom were both refreshing.

At the reference desk, he signed up for a computer terminal.

With thirty minutes to kill, he glanced around. It was like picking from a Cambodian restaurant menu – so many delicious choices. Manga in the young adults section? A paperback? Maybe a novel or a mystery?

He didn't really know what he felt like. He didn't really have a plan.

Instead, he closed his eyes, spun around twice (discretely so that he wouldn't be making an obvious scene), stuck his index finger out, peeked his eyes and walked forward until his finger pressed against the spine of a book.

He closed his hand around the volume and tugged it loose from the stack.

No way!

Joe found himself laughing.

He spotted an open chair, dropped into it, opened the cover and began reading.

THE END

BIO: Mark Binder writes and tell stories. His latest collection is "It Ate My Sister." More at his website: www.markbinder.com

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