

# A Life of Books

*a short story by J. J. Steinfeld*



image info

Shaun's books were scattered about his apartment. He began to gather them, piling one after another against a wall in even stacks. Then he began to count, at first each book individually, then by twos and threes: 587. Books shipped from city to city. Possessions he once couldn't bear to leave behind. Books even from elementary-school and junior-high-school days, and a copy of *The Little Engine That Could* from before he went to school, and every one of them read. But he no longer read, only looked at the books, helplessly attempting to recapture what they held and represented for him. The last books he had read were months ago, about theology—Thomas Merton and Karl Barth and Martin Buber—books from a night course on theology he had taken, attempting to ease back into university life after having dropped out nearly ten years ago. He had read the theology books with a desperate yearning, hoping they would give him something to believe in, but he was unable to firm his hands onto any ledge of belief.

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Shaun's father walked into the living room. His face was flushed and he was hitting his right hip hard with his right fist so that even the four-year-old boy, pushing a little toy truck across the floor, knew the man was angry. *Nerves, your father's nerves*, was his mother's usual after-the-fact explanation to her son.

"Did you deface this book?" the man asked his son, holding the picture book open, his fist now outstretched fingers. Perched atop the train engine were small birds similar to those

the four-year-old had seen on a tree outside his third-floor bedroom window. Some of the birds had toothy grins, others gloomy frowns, all the expressions human.

Shaun's mother hurried to the boy's side. "He doesn't know what deface means," she said to the man, cradling the child as if some debris were about to fall on his small body. The father was a large man but capable of swift movement, and he bent down to the little boy. *My daddy's bigger than the giant in Jack and the Beanstalk, way bigger*, Shaun used to tell his playmates. *Jack and the Beanstalk* was the first book he recalled being read by his father, the large man changing voices to fit the characters, performances filled with an awkward embrace of fatherhood, a love for his son temporarily soothing the indefinable discomfort he felt. Had Shaun heard his father's footsteps, he could have hidden himself in his room with his other books and toys. He had a picture book about secret hiding places: forest, mountaintop, rooftop, deep under the ground.

The man held a page in front of his son's face and demanded to know: "You draw these pictures?"

"He was only being a child," the mother defended her son.

"This is defacement. Books are not to be defaced." The man's hip-hitting resumed, becoming harder.

"Shaun loves that book. He knows every word of it."

The man grabbed the toy truck from the boy's hands. "This the little truck that could? This a pal of the little engine whose book you defaced?"



The little boy began to cry.

“He’s taking after you already . . . whimpering,” the man said, and went to the window. “The boy has to learn,” he said, and threw the toy truck out the window onto the small front lawn between their old apartment building and the sidewalk. “This book is no good anymore. It’s defaced,” he said, and threw the book out the window also. Then he began to apologize, to slap at his forehead in confusion and remorse. Later the mother went outside and found the toy truck and the book. A wheel had broken off the toy, and the book’s cover was dirtied by damp soil and the grass that had been cut earlier in the day.

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Shaun grabbed two armfuls of books, a few dropping as he opened the door, and

made his way out of the building. One of the books he dropped, an anthology of travel writing, had been a birthday gift from his wife—*For My Dearest Booklover, Happy Reading and Happy 28th*, the inscription read—before they had separated two years ago. Maybe she’ll send me a book when the divorce comes through, he thought, diluting his gloominess.

He could remember the first time the topic had entered their conversation. “My parents are divorced.” Melanie had been smiling and laughing, and all of a sudden she made that disclosure, and Shaun remembered how coldly she had related that to him.

“My mother is going to remarry,” he had told her, managing to hold onto a smile. “I haven’t met the guy yet. She wants me to be at the wedding. He’s the subject of a chapter in a book on entrepreneurial success stories. People who have gone bankrupt and risen from the economic ashes. Not the stuff of mythology, if you ask me. My mother sent me two copies of the book. In one of the books, on the Table of Contents page, she wrote, ‘I lucked out this time.’”

That first evening Melanie had said the expression *broken home—we’re both from broken homes*—and Shaun had echoed it, and they both commented on how strange a choice of words it was—*broken home*. “Broken apartment,” Shaun had said, “we lived in an apartment, a broken apartment. My father still lives in the same apartment, can you believe that? I stay with him when I’m going to school.” “Broken townhouse, we lived in a broken townhouse,” Melanie said, and they were both laughing again.

He had been thinking a great deal lately about their first time together as if watching a play in which he had missed something earlier

and was determined to find the essential clues. When he reached the street he placed his books on the sidewalk.

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Shaun was waiting in the long check-out line, standing behind his shopping cart and reading a book. A Margaret Laurence novel. He had searched for this edition of the book all over town and had purchased it before coming to the grocery store.

He leaned against his shopping cart and it rolled into the woman in front of him. “I’m sorry,” he said, pulling his cart away from the woman and dropping the book. The hardback book, its covers flapping like a bird pushed off a branch, hit the woman on the foot.

“I didn’t know a grocery store could be such a dangerous place,” she said.

After apologizing several more times—and the woman assuring him she would live, though her entire life had raced past her eyes—Shaun, picking up the book, said, “I was arrested because of this book, when I was eighteen.”

“You clobber an innocent soul with the book?” she said.

“A much sadder tale of misfortune,” he told her, and smiled. “It would make a wonderful animated short.”

“Not a major film? Surely your misfortune merits a full-length, big-budget feature.”

When she saw the cover of the Laurence novel, she said she had read *The Stone Angel*, and enjoyed it greatly but had never been arrested for anything. “You didn’t really get arrested because of *The Stone Angel*?” she said, not yet able to get a handle on Shaun’s sense of humor, a sense of humor she would love, even after she no longer loved him.

They had their first date not long after

that and spent the evening drinking beer and discussing books. “I’ve spent most of my two-year stay at university in the library, hiding, reading books that weren’t assigned, looking for something but not knowing what I was looking for.” He told her he didn’t know if he could finish the semester, had begun thinking of quitting. He had a job lined up in an electronics store. He pinched his left ear, and said, “Maybe I’ll sell electronic devices until I hear my calling.”

She had been considering taking a year off to travel. Europe. A literary excursion. “I have compiled a list of writer’s addresses, where they wrote or died, or did both.” She took the list out of her backpack.

“You really do have a list,” Shaun said.

“You think I’d lie to someone who’d dropped a Margaret Laurence hardback on my foot?” The address of Sylvia Plath’s final London residence was at the top of the list.

“I’ll travel with you, he offered. I wouldn’t mind seeing where some famous European philosophers did their philosophizing. Or maybe, where Somerset Maugham wrote *Of Human Bondage*.”

She accepted impulsively, and he said they just might wind up being inseparable. Then they told each other their names. “You think there’s a novel somewhere with two characters named Melanie and Shaun?” she had asked. “It wouldn’t take one of those infinite number of typing monkeys long to hit the keys for ‘Shaun is smitten by Melanie,’” he said, and she said, “I’d rather have an infinite number of tiny, erudite mice at their keyboards.”

The first book he bought her was a pre-World War II travel guide to literary London, autographed by the author, and annotated throughout by the previous owner of the

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book. One of the annotations, which Melanie particularly liked, was “Met Beatrice in a restaurant not far from where H. G. Wells used to live as a young man.”

As people walked by, Shaun offered them a book. Some refused, others accepted reluctantly, a few took the gifts with bewilderment and gratitude. A local prostitute who lived in the same building as Shaun blew him a kiss, told him she would be back for her book after work.

“I must have read this book about forty years ago. Bought it through a book club,” the woman he had given *Of Human Bondage* to said. She skimmed through the book, glanced at sentences, read a sentence by the character Mildred in a lackluster imitation of an English accent.

When Shaun had given away the first batch, he returned to his room and brought down more books, this time carrying them in a large suitcase, which he opened on the sidewalk.

“Here, let me give you something for this. It’s nearly new,” a white-haired man said, reaching into his pocket.

“No, can’t accept any money. I’m trying to bribe my way into bibliophile heaven,” Shaun told him.

The man smiled and left, leafing through his book.

Another refusal. “But it’s *Under the Volcano*,” Shaun said, with exaggerated emotion. “Malcolm Lowry wrote a lot of the book in British Columbia, but it’s set in Mexico. The last video my wife and I saw together was *Under the Volcano*, so I have a sentimentality about the book and the film. I’m not absolutely sure, but I think she left me the same month we watched the film.” This man quickened his pace and did not respond.

To another wary passerby, the strange face covered with distrust, Shaun exclaimed, “Here, a sexy book. Female erotica, my friend.” Still the man did not take the offering or even stop. “Belonged to one of my aunts.”

To a woman Shaun gave away a Bible. “You with a religious organization?” she inquired, sure he would ask her for money.

“Lord no.”

The woman smiled cautiously and walked away with her Bible.

“Read it as literature, and it’s a sublime experience,” Shaun called after her.

A stumbling man pleaded for a smoke, muttered a fragment of a grievous life story, and Shaun gave him a book by Northrop Frye. “I flunked the course,” he told the man, “but it’s a highly stimulating book.”

Melanie moved hastily past the large man standing at the entrance to Shaun’s room.

“In your own father’s apartment,” the man said, shaking his head at his son.

“I am in my room. You shouldn’t come into my room.”

“What a disregard of decency.”

Shaun stood up from the bed and went to the door, but his father blocked his exit. “You holding me prisoner in my own room?”

“There has to be communication between us.”

“I asked Melanie to marry me tonight. Actually, we asked each other to get married. Simultaneously.”

“I guess I should wish you the best,” Shaun’s father said, his eyes glancing around the room, seeming to be searching for additional evidence of his son’s wantonness and saw a Bible on Shaun’s desk. He walked over to the desk. “Is this the Bible your mother and I gave you for your high-school graduation?”

“You can check the inscription.”

“You put this Bible here to witness your engagement?”

“I’m working on a paper for school. There are other books on my desk.”

Shaun’s father picked up Northrop Frye’s *The Great Code*: “You think I would enjoy this book?”

“Give it a try. Maybe you could help me with my paper.”

“You sure you want to spend your life with Melanie?”

“I couldn’t be surer of anything.”

“This Sherlock Holmes collection was purchased in what had to be the tiniest



bookstore in London. I bought it when I was overwhelmingly in love. On the same day, we saw where Karl Marx wrote in the British Museum, where Sylvia Plath died, and where Charles Dickens pursued his immortality.” A woman took the book and said she had been overwhelmingly in love once, but it lasted less than a day. He also handed out books he had purchased in France and Italy. “We did a literary trip, when my true love and I were in our early twenties,” he explained.

Shaun continued on, one or two or three books to each person who would accept, until he tired and traded the street for his room. Later in the evening he returned to the street and completed the giveaway, including the novel his mother had been reading when Shaun walked into the room and she told him that she and his father would

be separating. “This book has inestimable sentimental value.”

Six or seven adults passed before a young boy, about twelve, took the book. Shaun could see him arc the book into a trash container, a last-second shot to win the basketball game. Shaun yelled something about a nice shot, even if it was sacrilege. He thought of retrieving the book, but he didn’t.

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“You know something,” Shaun’s mother said, a book open on her lap, tears flowing with her words, “I’ve never read *Of Human Bondage* before. I’ve seen the movie a bunch of times, three versions of the movie, in fact, but I’ve never read the book.”

He could stay a portion of the time with his father and the rest of the time with her. She attempted to steady her emotions: “You can keep half your books with your father here and half with me. I found a new job I know I’m going to love. And best of all, I’m going to rent a little house. You’ll have a backyard. You’ve lived all your life on the third floor of an apartment building.”

When Shaun turned away silently, she followed the moody fifteen-year-old to his room. “Want to go to a bookstore? A new book for your collection.”

Shaun looked at his neatly arranged collec-

tion, alphabetized by title. He began his counting at the first book on the first shelf, and tapped each book with his finger as he continued, saying the numbers aloud.

“We can spend the rest of the day visiting bookstores, Shaun.”

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“I do have something for your grandchildren,” Shaun told the woman and looked through

the suitcase. Before he even found the book, he started to tell the story of *The Little Engine That Could*, and the woman joined with him in the refrain. He pulled the book out of the suitcase and paused before handing it to the woman. “This book has the ability to fly.”

The woman saw *Das Kapital* in the suitcase and asked if she could see it. “Better yet, it’s yours,” Shaun declared, a carnival barker’s enthusiasm. “*Das Kapital* was from my Economic History course. Amazingly, I did

quite well in that class.”

“We had a copy of this in our house when I was growing up. My parents were never Communists, but they liked discussing all ideologies.”

“I had two copies of *Das Kapital*, one I purchased in a tiny bookstore in London. I’d never seen such a tiny bookstore. Earlier in the day I’d visited the British Museum, saw



image info

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where Marx had worked. The proprietor of the bookstore, a most English chap, told me that his grandfather had been beaten up by his own father for joining the Communist Party. My father, a staunchly apolitical man, never beat me, never even spanked me, but he was prone to heave things out the window. He died a few months ago. I went to visit him when he was dying. I didn’t know how to comfort him. I asked some stupid philosophical question about meaning or purpose. He turned his head away—I thought to keep me from seeing him cry. I really didn’t know how to comfort my dying father. He started to tell the story of *The Little Engine That Could*. Word for word. His voice was all rough, and you could feel the agony. I thought he was going to die in the middle of the story. I asked him if he remembered throwing my toy truck and book out the window. He didn’t

remember that. Before he died, he told me he had wanted to be an actor—had struggled for years. He gave up after I was born. I never knew that. I grew up knowing that my mother was dissatisfied, hated the jobs she did, wasn’t the happiest wife the world has ever know. But I always regarded my father as philosophical about the hard life he had dealt him. To me, my father always worked in construction. That’s what affected his nerves, my mother used to tell me. The noise. He hated the noise, and he worked in construction. He died a week after my visit. He was a marvelous reader. His performance of *Jack and the Beanstalk* occupies my memory stage.”

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Shaun signed for the two large boxes, and the delivery man grumbled that he had a lot



of heavy boxes today. Shaun carried the first box into the living room, then returned to the entranceway for the second one, and stood holding it, performing some silent test of endurance. His mother came into the room.

“My sister knew you love books, Shaun.”

“I never thought of her as a reader. Except tabloids maybe.”

“She had potential. Changed. When she was younger, she wanted to be a writer.”

“Aunt Phyllis?”

“She used to write me long letters that included the names of books she recommended I read. With these wonderful little summaries.”

Shaun carried the two boxes, one at a time, up to his room. Masking tape was crisscrossed over the boxes, and printed on a

strip of masking tape of the first box was BOX 1 OF 2—POETRY AND FICTION, and on the second, BOX 2 OF 2—NON-FICTION. The first book he removed, from BOX 2 OF 2, a history of arctic exploration, contained an old love letter written to Phyllis, from another woman.

The second last book he gave away was to an off-duty police officer who began to question Shaun. He explained what he had done, beginning to name some of the 587 titles, and the off-duty police officer said he was writing a gritty play in his spare time about the crime and drug scene in the area. Shaun said he used to have a few theater-related books, but they had been given away, however, he handed the off-duty police officer his *Bulfinch's Mythology*, telling the man

it would be of great help in any writing. He also told him that his father had wanted to be an actor, and if life had been different, perhaps his father could have acted in the gritty play, and the off-duty police officer left satisfied that Shaun was not a threat to anyone.

The three high-school friends had already finished a twelve-pack of beer. It was the oldest one's nineteenth birthday. In the bookstore, they were laughing and joking and daring each other to buy the sexiest book. *That's one beautiful Kama Sutra. Love those illustrations.* One of them dared the others to steal the sexiest book. They left the bookstore and walked around the downtown, discussing and commenting on the city life around them. When they reached another bookstore, a secondhand bookstore that had a window display of art books, blocks away, the plan was the first one to steal three books and make it to the hamburger joint down the street would be the winner, and the other two would treat him to supper, all he could eat.

“I was the only one to take a Canadian book,” Shaun told the police officer who had arrested him and driven him to the police station.

“That make you special?”

“They're good books.”

“Drinking, petty thievery, not a good way to go about your life.”

“Nothing petty about *The Stone Angel.*”

“Stealing is stealing, and unless you smarten up, you'll have plenty of time to read in jail.”

“I went for a hardback, that was a serious error in judgment. None of the others went for hardbacks. They looked for the thinnest paperbacks around.”

“You still here, honey?” the prostitute said to Shaun.

“It's been a long, tough day. Full of memories.”

“Tell me about long and tough,” the prostitute said. “Where are all your books?”

Shaun offered the woman his last book, and she took it. She read the title about theology, and said, “This ought to help me fall asleep tonight.”

“You believe in God?” Shaun asked.

“Oh my, now that is the question of all questions. You should have asked me before I went off to work.”

“So what's your answer of all answers?”

“I believe in God, I most certainly do. I just wish God would have found me another line of work.”

The woman left, and Shaun stood there alone. He looked up at a streetlight, staring as if into another person's eyes. A little while later, a man with crutches stopped for a rest next to him, and Shaun lowered his eyes and said, “Both my father and the giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk* were as tall as that streetlight, and I'm not exaggerating. My mother, who had been dissatisfied with her lot in life, is embarking on a new life. I can't imagine getting married again.” Shaun reached into his empty suitcase, wanting to give the departing stranger a book. “Had you been by earlier, I would have bestowed books like jewels on you,” he called after the man.

Fighting away tears, Shaun walked toward a nearby bookstore, wondering what book he would buy to start his collection anew. ∞

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