

Librarian

TIM MYERS

They approached the Circulation Desk just before noon. Ms. Jenner was replacing bar-code stickers on older books when she happened to look up and see them; they'd stepped forward quietly and then stood there, waiting for her to finish, the way some people do.

But it wasn't out of courtesy; she could see that at a glance.

They were a couple, seemed to be husband and wife, in their early forties probably, and nicely dressed—they looked like professional people. He wore a blue suit with a dark-purple tie; she was in a simple but stylish green dress, topped off by a patterned scarf fastened with a gold clasp. But something was wrong; Ms. Jenner picked that up right away. Maybe they were sick; she'd heard there was a stomach virus going around.

The husband stood forward a little; he'd do the talking. His wife stood behind him and to the right. But her eyes were unfocused, her head tilted downward; she held a small purse in front of her with both hands. For a moment Ms. Jenner wondered if she might be mentally disturbed. She suddenly remembered her grandfather's old cocker spaniel on the table at the vet's, just before they'd put it to sleep. The woman looked like that.

"I'm sorry," the man began, with a pained expression. "We have some overdue books. We thought we'd pay the fine." He set three books carefully on the counter.

Ms. Jenner moved with professional automaticity to the computer,

picking up the scanner and scanning the codes on the books.

The scanner gave its usual dull beep of recognition each time. *101 Questions for Teens. What to Do When You've Got the Blues. A Catcher in the Rye.* She looked up from the screen.

"Are you James Masterson?" she asked.

The man almost winced; Ms. Jenner was confused. "No," he said haltingly. "Jimmy...that's...my son."

"Well, Mr. Masterson," Ms. Jenner continued—here her years of experience took over, and she let exactly the right amount of indignation into her voice—"these books are over a month late. You're aware, I'm sure, that our other patrons have their rights too—in fact, I see here that one of the books has been on request since the 24th of last month. I'll have to calculate your fines..." Though her expression was stern, Ms. Jenner sighed inwardly; words couldn't say how tired she was of such things.

"I know, ma'am," the man said meekly, though he didn't strike Ms. Jenner as the meek type. "You've left two messages on our answering machine." It was a smaller city; sometimes the librarians did that.

Ms. Jenner looked up at him quickly. But he meant no sarcasm, she could tell.

"I did, Mr. Masterson. It's important we get our books back. Our funding for replacement volumes is limited, you know."

"I'm sorry," the man repeated.

Suddenly the wife spoke, though she didn't look up. "These are our son's books. Were our son's books."

Ms. Jenner felt a stab of uneasiness. She looked narrowly from

one to the other.

The man had turned to his wife; he seemed to reach for her, opening his hands but moving them only an inch or two in her direction. Then he closed them and turned back.

"Our son," he said. "You see...please don't take this the wrong way. But our son is dead. He killed himself. That's why the books are late."

Ms. Jenner's heart leapt violently in her chest, pounding so hard it almost seemed to jerk her shoulders. *Why are you telling me this?* she wanted to scream.

"He killed himself," the man repeated, as if he had to keep saying it. Ms. Jenner looked down at the box on the screen where the computed fines would appear. "We don't want you to feel bad," the man continued dully. "You couldn't have known. Of course. It's just that...that's why they're late."

Ms. Jenner felt as if she were suddenly standing next to a great fire, so close the whipping flames almost touched her, her skin beginning to blister from the heat. She wanted to turn and run howling away. But she murmured something automatic and the amount of the fine appeared on the screen and she took their money, her head down the whole time. Then they left.

"Jane," she called to a co-worker, "I'm going home for lunch."

Jane came over and looked her up and down. "Marylou, are you okay? You look shaky. You're not coming down with that stomach bug, I hope."

Ms. Jenner forced a smile. "I may be," she said weakly.

When she came down the front steps of the library, she turned up the street toward the canal just beyond the small park and the shops,

the cold air smelling fresh after the close bookish smell of the stacks.

It was a cool but bright winter day, high luminous clouds in a pale blue sky. Ms. Jenner walked with her head still down, as if not paying attention to where she was going. But when she came to the canal, she turned left and walked along it for three blocks, away from the busy streets.

Beyond a low chain-link fence the water in the canal lay still and shining under the winter sky, brilliant in contrast to its dusty sloping cement walls. *But it's moving*, she thought, *There's a current down below*. Behind her the old brick warehouses waited in the cool sunlight as if deserted. In that moment, nothing she'd ever seen seemed as beautiful as the shining water, the light warm and gold-red on the towering walls of brick.

Her eyes widened for a moment, as if she were trying to wake herself up. Looking around to be sure she was alone, she pulled a gun from her purse—an old .38 she'd bought last week at a pawnshop in a town two hours down the Interstate.

With an awkward but definite motion, she threw the gun out over the canal, watched it splash, sun-shimmer on the rising drops, and then imagined how it must look as it sank from that bright ceiling into the darkness of the silt-thick bottom.

Then she turned and walked home, feeling the sun's weak warmth on her face, threw herself onto her bed fully-dressed, and slept for the first time in three days. □