

It was a bright sunny day in early autumn, one of those days New Yorkers dote on, take pictures of, and point out to their country cousins as an example of the city at its best. The city after summer, after the pavements stop frying. The city not yet locked into the icy streets and frozen dog-wastes of winter. A picture-postcard day, a day to write home to Cincinnati or Scranton or Tullahoma about, and every New Yorker with an excuse was out of doors, clogging the sidewalks, slowing traffic, frightening the pigeons. Tour buses, hot dog vendors, street musicians, flower sellers; all had noticed an increase in trade. People were more cheerful. There was an excess of happy normalcy in the air.

The sun had risen that morning—as it did every morning—by bubbling up out of Long Island Sound, climbing over the Chrysler Building, and casting its warmth down on midtown Manhattan. By dusk it would be finished and sliding quickly toward the Jersey marshes.

If it sent down its warmth anywhere else, New Yorkers were not aware of it, and cared less. It was here, and it felt good. That was enough.

Two men who particularly reveled in the sunlight that September day were Harlan Bojay and Robert Learned Coombs. Bojay had once been a jockey, until, at the age of twenty-four, he had inexplicably gained forty-five pounds and four inches in height, which finished forever his dreams of winning the Triple Crown. This had been some thirty-five years ago, and Bojay had been unemployed since. His partner, Coombs, a taciturn Oklahoma Indian, had come to New York to make his fortune as a singer. He had drive, ambition, daring, pizzazz; everything in fact but a voice. And so, Harlan Bojay and Robert Learned Coombs were now partners in leisure, philosophy, and life.

They sat beneath the great jaws of a stone lion guarding the Fifth Avenue entrance to the New York Public Library, passing a bottle of Chateau Plain-Wrap back and forth and discussing the nature of existence.

“Robert, my lad. Have you ever been in there?”

“In there? In the library? Sure, I guess so. Coupla times.”

“Wonderful things, books...”

“Right.”

“But dangerous, exceedingly dangerous. Lots of dangerous things in books...”

Coombs was nonplussed. Once again Bojay had run off with the thread of the conversation. “Dangerous? You mean like guys who cut the centers out and hide guns an’ dope an’ stuff inside?”

Bojay snorted in exasperation. “I’m speaking of ideas, you melonhead. Dangerous ideas, ideas and philosophies.” He took a long draw on the wine. “Dangerous ideas...”

Coincidentally, less than a hundred feet away, Alice Melvin was thinking exactly the same thing, for an entirely different reason. Like Bojay and Coombs, she, too, had had big dreams, and like them she had come to New York to make them come true, but fate had once again taken down the road signs and painted out the center line. Instead of becoming a fashion designer, she was, at the age of 29, working in the New York Public Library. Stout and plain, any sort of meaningful social life had eluded her, and she’d become an exile in her own mind and a prisoner of her fantasies. The last man who had gone home with her had left in the morning with her VCR, and she’d given up trying, grimly resigned to a life in the stacks, moving books about, gaining wisdom and greatness through osmosis,

hoping to return in the next life as Lonnie Anderson. That is, until she had discovered the incunabula.

There were many locked and private collections of books at the main branch, and she'd had keys for some of them, but one day at the main desk she'd picked up the wrong set of keys by accident. At least she told herself it was an accident. She had then proceeded to try a few doors that had been closed to her. Behind one of them, in a collection of European popular incunabula, she had discovered a book of woodcuts depicting sexual positions and concepts she'd not dreamed existed. They were crude in comparison to better works of both the period and the subject, but they touched a chord deep in Alice Melvin.

On that sunny September day, deep in the stacks where no sunlight ever reaches, Alice Melvin was reshelving books, working her cart slowly along the aisles near the card catalogue. As she turned over each title, checking the numbers on the spine, she failed to notice the vaguest hint of an odor on the air, a sickly sweetness that seemed to waft at right angles to her path, drifting toward the endless rows of card files.

Alice's mind was only half on her job. Part of her attention was fixed on the books themselves, their titles, the esthetic effect on her imagination. When the first of the card catalogue drawers began to slide soundlessly open, her mind was miles away, traveling hopefully through a series of renderings on Hellenic pottery themes.

Alice had just discovered a truly provocative illustration, when something landed in front of her on the cart. It was a catalogue card. Had it fallen from an upper shelf, or was it the work of some prankster? She turned angrily, then froze. Dozens of drawers had opened in the long line of cabinets, and millions of carefully indexed cards were shooting into the air, caroming off the stacks, and settling and swirling in great blizzards to the floor. As she watched in horror, more drawers began to open, more cards exploded into the air.

Alice Melvin's jaw worked convulsively; she turned, and ran. Not pranksters, her mind supplied. Definitely not pranksters.

At the end of the row she halted to catch her breath. Report, she realized. I must report this to someone. Carefully, tensely, she tiptoed down a parallel aisle, heading for the stairwell to the floor above, yet keeping as far from the card catalogue as possible. Through the ranked books she could still hear cards spewing into the air. Little piles had even drifted into the intersections, and she hurried past them, lest one of them reach out and grab her by the ankle. As she made her way along the last group of stacks, something crashed to the floor behind her and she leapt into the air.

No, I'm too young to have a heart attack, she thought. She turned, and saw a large book lying in the aisle. Another was wobbling on a shelf to her right. And as she watched, a third launched itself into the air and drifted across the space, neatly reshelving itself on the other stack. Then another, and another, and suddenly dozens of books were in motion, crossing back and forth across the aisle like rush-hour pedestrians. It was too much for her.

"No!" she cried. "I won't do it again, I promise. I'll never look at another dirty picture..."

And at that instant she turned the final corner and came face to face with the thing. They heard her scream all over the building.