

Adult Assembly Required

by

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When two people meet, each one is changed by the other so you've got two new people.

John Steinbeck



Summer

One.

Liz Quinn, the manager of Knights, one of the few remaining independent bookstores in Los Angeles, was not someone you'd describe as soft-hearted. Yes, she had adopted a stray cat who'd had kittens in the store and yes, she had a new relationship she sometimes blushed over, but generally speaking she viewed humanity with a jaundiced eye.

However, even Liz was having a hard time not feeling sorry for the customer standing in front of her.

To start with, the young woman was wet. It doesn't rain very often in Los Angeles, particularly in August, but it does rain, and ten minutes earlier the clouds had challenged themselves to dump as much rain as they possibly could. Liz had discovered a puddle in front of Douglas Adams and tracked it along the shelves to P.G. Wodehouse. There she found the homonimbus and spoke to her.

"Excuse me, would you care for a towel?"

The young woman turned to look at her and Liz realized she'd been crying.

"Uh...yes, thank you. It started raining." She was still crying, albeit silently; the tears kept rolling down her cheeks, leaving cinematically visible tracks in whatever grimy residue they were washing away.

"I'd ask if you were ok, but clearly you're not," said Liz, whose mastery of the précis was unsurpassed. She raised her voice and called to the back of the store, "Polly, bring a towel, will you?"

A muffled voice called back.

“No, I’m not ok,” said the woman. “I’m sorry about the floor.” She took a breath, and reached out to shake Liz’s hand. “My name is Laura Costello, and I’m having a bad day.” She realized that made her sound like a member of a 12-step group with an extremely low requirement for membership, but it’s what came out.

“In what way bad?” asked Liz, always interested in other people’s disasters. She wondered what was taking Polly so long with the towel, then remembered she herself had used it to dry Ferdinand the store cat, who’d also missed the memo about the rain. Her brow furrowed slightly as she tried to remember what she’d done with it...had she left it under the cat? Oh well, Polly would work it out. Liz refocused on Laura.

“Well,” said Laura, taking a deep breath and unloading at a rapid clip, “I moved here for grad school, but I came early so I could get settled and maybe line up some part-time work and today I had a job interview and it went well but I didn’t get it so I guess not that well and then I went home and my apartment building was on fire.” She paused, “Not *my* apartment building...”

Despite the narrative speed and slightly hysterical delivery, Liz was following. She nodded, her hands folded in front of her like a puzzled but hopeful Maitre’d. “I understood what you meant. I can see how that might put a kink in your knickers.”

Laura Costello looked at her cautiously, not 100% certain what knickers were, and sniffed, “So I called my grandmother for suggestions but she snorted and called me a wuss, and to distract me told me a friend of mine had cheated on her boyfriend Dave with Other Dave. The one with the toes.”

Liz was clinging to the thread, like the fantasy-genre jockey she was, “The original Dave was toe-less?”

Laura shook her head, “No, he has toes, but Other Dave has *extra* toes.”

Liz raised her voice again, “Polly! Towel!”

“And then she said I could always come home, which she knew would calm me down because obviously that’s not what I want to do.”

“Of course not,” said Liz, supportively, though she was beginning to regret even starting this conversation in the first place. Liz had what you might call resting-approachable-face, which meant this kind of detailed personal download got thrust on her all the time. It was a pity, because she really wasn’t very interested.

Laura gathered her long wet hair into a makeshift knot and looked at Liz, wide-eyed. “So I was wandering around trying to think of what to do and it started raining so I got on the first bus that came along and here I am.” She was trying to hold it together and behind her head the twist of hair was slowly and silently unfurling like a cinnamon bun, expanding in the heat of the store, “I have no job, no friends and now, no apartment and no dry clothes or actually any clothes except the ones I’m wearing.” Unexpectedly, she smiled, “But I’m still here and in another month I’ll start grad school and then I’ll have somewhere to live.” She turned up her hands, “It’s fine, I’m fine, everything’s fine.” There was a wobble hiding somewhere in her voice, but it was keeping its head down pretty successfully.

At that very minute Polly Culligan, one of the employees of the bookstore, turned up with the towel, “Sorry,” she said breathlessly, “The cat didn’t want to let go.” Then she noticed the drying tears and the soot and the expression on Liz’s face and raised her voice. “Nina!” she yelled, “Put the kettle on.”



Nina Hill was the co-owner of Knights, and a bookish person of the first order. She had been spending the afternoon going through school reading lists for the year, making sure the store was completely stocked. True, most local parents would purchase their books online, the quislings, but you would be surprised how many copies of *The Outsiders* the store ended up selling at the last minute (*stay gold, Ponyboy*). Plus, if a local parent walked in and asked for *The House on Mango Street* or *The Great Gatsby* and some other parent had snatched up the last copy there would be hell to pay (and Amazon would pocket the profit). Nina took this responsibility seriously and had been deep in concentration when the door suddenly burst open and a tall, damp woman accosted her where she sat. Nina leapt to her feet, yanked out the earbuds that had prevented her hearing the yelling, the knocking, or the requests for kettle assistance, and prepared to do battle.

“Hello,” said the sudden arrival who was, of course, Laura. She looked down, “How did you fracture your wrist?” She’d appeared so abruptly because the rain had made the door to the office swell, and she’d had to push rather harder than she’d expected and... you can imagine the rest.

“I’m sorry,” said Nina, “Are you looking for a book?” She backed up a little, which caused her to step on the cat, who bit her on the ankle. Ferdinand had only just recovered from the loss of the towel, and being stepped on was a bridge too flipping far.

“Is it a Colles fracture?” asked Laura, still standing there dripping on the carpet. The thing to know about both Nina and Laura – though they didn’t realize it about each other at the time – is that they were both women of singular focus. Nina was obsessed with books, popular culture, movies and anything meme-able. Laura was obsessed with sports, bones, muscles and

achieving a full range of motion. Unfortunately, Laura's specific area of interest was making her come across as a bit of a nutter. Especially when you added damp, smoke, and the wild hair that was reminding Nina of Scandinavian Hagrid, *which isn't even a thing*.

"I don't know what kind of fracture it is," Nina said crossly, "Are you from my health insurance company?" Her voice was surprisingly deep, and there was zero nonsense in her tone. Possibly even less than that.

Laura frowned, "No."

"Are you from OSHA?" Occupational Safety and Health don't normally get involved in non-work related incidents, but Nina was taking no chances.

"No," Laura took a step back and stomped on Polly who was right behind her. She squeaked, but had more self-control than the store cat and didn't bite Laura at all.

"Hey, Cerberus," growled Liz dryly from beyond Laura's shoulder, "This person needs a cup of tea not an interrogation."

"Liz?" said Nina.

"Yes," replied her friend and business partner, pushing past Laura, who seemed to be frozen in place. "Who else would it be? This is not a surprise attack, an insurance check-up or even a random piece of Dada performance art, it's a damp customer who's having a bad day and needs a cup of tea." She bustled over to the kettle, flicking it on and turning around to raise her eyebrows at Nina, "Remember those people who sometimes come between you and your tidy shelves? The ones we depend upon for our livelihood?"

"Oh," said Nina, squinting dubiously at Laura. "Yes... I remember them."

Laura looked at the small, slender young woman in the 50's fit-and-flare dress and immediately worried they weren't going to get on. Nina was the kind of hip, geek-chic girl

who'd looked over her vintage-framed glasses in high school and made Laura feel oversized and clumsy. "Sorry," said Laura, "I probably should have introduced myself first before asking about your wrist, but I'm training to be a physical therapist and a cast always catches my eye." She dropped her gaze to underline her non-threatening status and immediately started being jealous of Nina's shoes, which were small and beaded. She had always wished she were 'quirky' enough to wear vintage clothes, but she'd never been able to pull it off.

Nina looked mollified, "Well, I'm sorry for leaping to the conclusion that you were a health insurance spy."

"That's a thing?" asked Polly, whose expression suggested she was imagining something far more exciting than the reality.

Nina looked strangely pleased to answer, "Are you kidding? Insurance fraud – not counting health insurance – costs the industry over \$40 billion dollars a year. Health insurance fraud on its own is more like \$70 billion." Nina raised her eyebrows, "And while life insurance dates back to the Benevolent Societies of ancient Greece and Rome, we also have evidence of insurance fraud dating back to the first century AD which, if you think about it..."

"Enough trivia chatter," interrupted Liz, "I need tea."



Ten minutes later Nina still hadn't explained how she'd hurt herself. To be fair, that ten minutes had been taken up by Laura explaining about the fire, the apartment, the job...but Nina had made the tea left handed without spilling, so Laura estimated she'd been in the cast at least a month.

“Thanks,” she said, taking the tea. “But seriously, how did you fracture your wrist? I really want to know.” She was sitting on a table at the back of the office, having politely asked the cat to move. The cat was beyond cheesed off by that point and Liz had to intervene and give up her chair.

Nina rolled her eyes and said, “It’s a super boring story. I slipped getting out of the shower and my hand slid into the base of the toilet and bent the wrong way. *Very* elegant. The slapping sound of my wet butt cheeks hitting the tile will be the sound effect for every embarrassment I ever experience from here on in. It sounded like someone thwacking a porpoise with a fly swatter.”

Laura gazed at Nina and felt her jaw wanting to drop open. Laura had grown up in an opinionated and vocal family, probably more than most, but Nina didn’t talk like anyone she’d ever met and it was freaking her out. Nina’s pattern of speech was so quick and confident that Laura mentally withdrew a little. She herself was more of a doer than a sayer. At least, that’s what her Grandma used to tell her when she’d faltered into silence in the middle of a sentence again. Her tongue got tied and her brothers laughed, and she...couldn’t.

“I don’t think it’s a boring injury story,” said Liz, “It’s like the librarian in *Library Lion*.” All three booksellers then smiled in exactly the same way. Not in a creepy *Children of the Corn/Stepford Wives* way, but from habit.

Laura frowned. “Is that a book?” *No flies on you, Costello*, she chided herself. *Here you are... in a bookshop*.

“It’s a wonderful children’s book about a lion that comes to the library.” There was a pause, then Liz added, “Nina would read it to you, but I warn you, she’ll cry at the end.”

They all looked at Nina, who Laura would not have thought was an easy-crier, and she shrugged.

“Sorry, happy endings make me weepy. Sue me. There is a classic John Hancock commercial...*Grandma can have my room...*” she shook her head and looked at Laura, ready to change the subject. “You and I are not the same size, but – don’t take this the wrong way – I have some of my boyfriend’s clean clothes at my house, and his sweatpants are at least dry.” She shuddered, “I do not enjoy wearing damp clothing. They made us swim in middle school and you had to dress fast before next class and pulling knee socks onto wet legs is surprisingly overwhelming.” She closed her eyes briefly, and added, “I’ll run home right now and grab them. I live super close.”

“You know,” said Polly, “This is why I keep half my wardrobe in the back of my car. You never know when you’re going to need a new ensemble.”

“She didn’t drive,” said Liz, “She took the bus.”

“She what?” asked Polly, frowning, “Where’s your car? Did it burn too?”

Laura shook her head, “No, I don’t have a car. I’ve only been here a week or two, I keep meaning to get around to it.”

Polly was aghast, “You need a car in LA,” she said, “I mean, loads of people use public transport, but it’s not like New York...it doesn’t actually *work*.”

Nina shook her head, “You’re wrong, the metro alone carries three hundred and fifty thousand passengers a day and there are over two hundred bus lines.” Then she shrugged, “Anyhoo, I’ll go get you dry clothes and then we can have a very typical Los Angeles conversation about the relative merits of freeways and surface streets.” She headed out the door.

“Thanks,” said Laura dubiously, unsure how she could contribute to such a conversation, “You guys are being very nice to me.”

“Slow afternoon,” said Liz, adding fresh hot water to her tea. She tilted her chair back to check the store, but it was only two regulars who would yell if they needed her. Liz was dressed in black, which was her preferred hue, and her t-shirt said *I would prefer not to* which was confusing because she’d been exceptionally obliging so far. Laura could feel the beginnings of a headache.

Polly started bouncing up and down, “Oh my god, I can’t believe I didn’t think of this sooner. You can come and stay with me!!” She corrected herself, “Well, not with me, literally, but in the house where I live. Last week a tenant left to go on tour and his room is available.” Polly was blonde like Laura, but where Laura was all shades of fawn and gold and caramel Polly was the palest straw, with blue eyes that saw excitement and drama everywhere. She was wearing rainbow striped tights under a purple corduroy mini skirt, with yellow boots and a t-shirt with a Twinkie™ on it. It was a look.

Liz frowned, “On tour with what?”

Polly shrugged, “*Jesus Christ Superstar*? Does it matter?” Polly was not a detail-oriented person. She was a big picture thinker. An idea person.

“Not especially,” said Liz, “Simply adding color to my day.” Liz liked ideas ok, but also enjoyed getting lost in the weeds.

Laura was still feeling bedraggled, though the tea was helping. “Where do you live?” she asked Polly.

“Very close, in Hancock Park,” said Polly. “It’s a *great* place, you’ll love it. It’s a big old house and the owner lives there and rents out rooms.” She grinned, kicking her sunny Doc

Martens as she perched on the desk, “Her kids grew up and she got bored on her own. She’s a trip.”

Takes one to know one, thought Laura. “How big a place?” she asked, curiously.

“Oh, big. There are five bedrooms,” replied Polly. “Not counting the landlord’s own space, but she has a whole floor.” She counted on her fingers, “Maggie has the top floor, she’s the owner, then on the second floor there are three bedrooms, and on the ground floor there are two. I guess they weren’t bedrooms to start with, they were a dining room and a sitting room, but now they’re bedrooms.” She smiled at Laura, “We share the kitchen and garden and there’s a pool and pets and it’s great.”

“I don’t know...” said Laura, feeling nervous about having room-mates, especially ones who were so quick to take strangers home, “I don’t think I even have enough money for a deposit. I mean, I have savings, but first, last and security...” She pulled a card from her pocket, “The landlord of the apartment building was there, and he said he’d pay for a hotel for a few nights, maybe I should call him.” The card was wet, but the number was still legible. “I mean, you don’t even know me, I could be a serial killer.”

Polly laughed. “I doubt it, they’re pretty rare.”

Liz snorted darkly, “Or maybe they only rarely get caught, did you think about that?”

“Nope,” said Polly, “And I still feel ok about her, there’s something about her shoes that says *reliable*.” They all looked down at Laura’s admittedly sensible Hoka running shoes. Polly pulled out her phone and started dialing. “I’ll call my landlady right now.”

Laura opened her mouth to object but caught Liz’s eye. The older woman shook her head.

“You can’t stop her once she gets going,” she said, getting to her feet and heading off to sell books to word-hungry customers, “Accept your fate, rest here and dry off.”

She and Polly left, pulling the door mostly closed behind them. Laura looked at the cat. The cat looked at her. Neither of them said anything, Laura because she didn’t speak cat and the cat because she was mentally composing a letter to her senator.

