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Bookworm

By: Angela Lang

To those who don't read,

those who can't,

and those who don't want to.

DISCLAIMER

I need to tell you the story of how I got the book I'm holding in my hand, or better said stumbled upon it. It is a great adventure and you will enjoy it, but it comes with a price. I need your help to choose. I tell you everything I remembered. You draw your own conclusions and make a choice, a choice you can't regret.

People own books for different reasons. There are writers that examine the competition and beat themselves up. There are voracious readers that only care about stories. There are collectors that get their fix by the chase of a rarity, or those who just want to show how much they own or how well-read they are. And there is me, Max Kaplan, who studies books but as a personal principle stopped owning them. And there are the people at the Happy Ending Society, who like to eat them.

I'm not going to lie. I did not choose to have this book so this is not my first try at telling this story. I certainly hope it is my last. Since none of the previous decision-making methods worked, I invoke the most sacred bond in literature: reader and writer. Before you take your pick, I feel the need to write up a disclaimer. You can skip it and get to the story, but it made sense in my head to include it now, so we all know where we stand.

Notice, I did not say author. I cannot think of myself as one and I'm not particularly fond of writing, but believe me, it was the only choice left. The cultish of the author really bores me. There was never such an importance on an individual before in literature. Text spoke for itself. The teachings remained, the vehicle escaped. I was not born Max Kaplan, but that's how the world knows me. I can't escape it. Do I want that to be the label that speaks to you? Certainly not, but you need it to attach an identity to this work and to relate to it. So here it is.

More of my temporary truth: Max Kaplan is a Psychology Ph.D. student lost in his research. His modest inquire about why people own books and create specific bonds with them, turned into: an old lady gave me a book that a sect of book lovers want to eat, and I go back and forth about giving it to them.

On my first try, when I started to write, there was a part of me that spoke, I could clearly located in my left side brain, a brilliant manifestation of my over stimulated academic intellect that felt like having the last word. So in a cold and detached

experiment I set out to dissect a series of events that my cause-and-effect Aristotelian logic attributed to meeting Madam Rombaeur, the old lady. The initial purpose and motivation behind it was a compulsive need to tell an unusual story, to celebrate the fact that it had happened to me and, to brag a bit about it. As the writing progressed, my situation morphed, or viceversa. And here I am, betting on choice, persuading you to mark, for me, a before and after.

Madam Rombauer was the first person that told me that she collected books because she liked repetition. Writers, she said, were the masters of recycling and even though it could seem to a stranger that the titles and topics in her library were different, the more she bought and read the more she realized there were only few ideas that could be trapped in a text or worthy of it. And those were captured and recaptured in different formats and different voices by naive subjects that claimed a glance at originality. She felt she was doing them a favor by collecting them and setting them next to each other, "match-making" them. I asked her then if she got bored to find the same and the same, and she said no, actually she loved it. There was a sense of comfort and security in having the same set of ideas tamed, upheld, condensed. She was not afraid of variety, but she sensed that it could definitely be overwhelming, almost a threat to her sense of reality. Repetitive ideas leaked pieces of unknown space, they leaked blue in a cloudy sky. She needed them to get a sense of the shape of the clouds, but for the most, repetition had the duty to reassure. Tamed ideas were the pillars of the known

and gave readers layers to be discovered, relieving them from the need to invent. She came into my life with an offer I couldn't refuse, and I became the recovery alcoholic that escaped addiction by working in a liquor store. Smell substituted taste. I never got a chance to tell her that I stopped owning books or that I intended not to read them anymore. It was too much of a paradox for someone allegedly studying the habits of book buyers and readers. It would have been the acknowledgement of an end.

I am not trying to justify my choices, but the one thing that drew me into the Happy Ending Society, in spite of their dubious name, was this principle of multiple endings. They defended the ability to identify endings and beginnings as they unfolded, disregarding the need for an epic resolution as a reward for action. *Life is full of happy endings*, read the inscription on my first invitation. Life is the book of ending, the book of ends. The waiting, the space of nothingness that kept me hanging to any kind of resolution might be what keeps you turning the page. You are responsible for your own longing. I make no political promise to disguise my despair.

Every time I have tried to rationalize the experiences that lead up to this moment, I hit a wall. Different versions of myself want to speak up, seduce by the immortality that goes into what is inked on a typed page. They argue to conjure the present. I need you to break the spell.

Why did you pick up this book now? Why do you need me?

CHAPTER 1

Every time, I met a person, especially a woman, I tried to imagine what kind of book she was. A pristine hardcover? A one-read paperback? A rare manuscript? An out of print? I stared at the long legs and hanging arms, and couldn't help to wonder: Will her pages go yellow? Any rough edges? What's the color of the cover underneath her jacket?

My perceptions became intuitions when I met Emily Rombauer. A combination of a Spanish novel with a paperback train-ride-read mystery, Madam Rombauer, as she liked to be called, wore a solid Monotype. She had a simple and abstract drawing for a cover, and no writer's picture or comments in the back.

I'm not a compulsive liar, but sometimes I minimize truth for the sake of the listener. I had said before that my connection with Madam Rombauer was a sale transaction, "I just helped her with some books," but the truth is that encountering this

woman changed the nature and the purpose of my PhD research and any other projects I had set out to accomplish.

I saw her for the first time when I went to organize her bookshelf. She was afraid of people coming into her house to steal her stuff, but I was highly recommended by one of her neighbors, Carlota, a soft-spoken amicable girl I dated for a couple of months. She met me in a time when I was still fascinated with manuscripts and rare books, and she felt unable to compete with the millions of pages that I still have to discover. Her uncertainties crowded my bedroom. She behaved like a collection of short stories, full with anecdotes, sketched traits and too many beginnings and endings, but we liked each other and kept an twice-a-year friendship that connected me to the gig.

When she called me, Carlota made emphasis on the triviality of the job—to compensate for the low pay—and added some remarks about the good karma that helping an elderly woman would bring to my otherwise messed up scholarship budget and the limbo of the PhD thesis writing life. "It could give you some structure and some cash flow," she said in a motherly voice, "and it has everything you love: dusty shelves, aging people and books." The joke didn't strike me as funny, but I could understand her bitterness as I started to sleep with a divorcee few weeks after our breakup.

The workload seemed easy; I had to empty some shelves, carry some books and rearrange them accordingly to the woman's criteria. Even though I should have, I didn't

care about the hourly rate or about what I imagined to be a crap collection of paperbacks with sentimental value. The optimist in me hoped to dig out a couple of under-appreciated first editions, buy them from her—at a fair price of course—and resell them on eBay.

There was an argument to be made about my fascination with the smell of leather, mold, and cracking paper; I enjoyed the deep marks and futile traces of time in books, and never gave up the struggle to find a parallel in the behaviors and physicality of older people within a culture of overrated youth. My passion really had to do with the history of ownership behind rare and old books. It was impossible to track the owning family tree, the places they had visited, the tears and pleasures in the hands that held them. The strongest attachments to my books came exactly from that history, the collection of memories that reminded me how each volume came to my shelf. Rare books collectors, in that way seemed like aliens to me.

Madam Rombauer was short. She looked like a human made out of toothpicks and put together with play-doh, her knees and elbows were huge, her torso and belly made a big round circle, and her head a smaller one. Before I came in, I had to removed my shoes and leave my closed bag next to them in the hallway. Standing in the doorframe, she inspected me in silence. With her palm opened, she pointed to a room in the back of the apartment, and walked close, almost next to me, but leaving me a short step ahead. She acted as if she wanted to make sure I was not going to detour or even look into the

other rooms.

The shelves in the room that she called "the office" were full of half books, stacks of pages, covers and dirt. My first task was to move everything out into the middle of the room. Then she wanted to organize something she described as a "get together in the shelves." When I asked for clarification she said that she expected to mix up the writers, "to orchestrate the meeting of those that in life might had never seen each other but on paper seemed to match to perfection." Her tone changed as soon as she began to describe her project.

"This is the seed for an ideal and democratic city where authors, secondary characters, and passages with character on their own will sleep, breathe, and make love freely," she whispered getting closer to me. Her voice didn't belong to her frame, it had a presence of its own as if a stronger person that had been trapped inside a small body finally had a chance to speak.

She started to hand me the books right away. I assumed we were going to clean before reorganizing. The project could take weeks, and I was pleased with the extra hours without giving total attention to what she was asking for. The details were taken care of while we stacked in a random order half of the first shelf. The only unusual request was the schedule. She wanted a night shift, I needed to come after 8 p.m.

Books were piled and stuffed in every cubbyhole in the rest of the apartment. They seemed to move on their own, to have an anima. Madam Rombauer didn't have much. At first glance, I caught a stool and a lithograph, a Japanese ideogram in the kitchen and a small red couch in the books' room covered by a yellow sheet. Pictures of her youth or her family were nowhere to be found.

I asked her if perhaps we should alphabetize the books while we were moving them out of the shelf, and she refused under the argument that it could hinder her creativity. "If a rebellious mystic gets the opportunity to exchange ideas with a science fiction writer they might come up with a musical sheet that has a device to recapture lost spirits or broken souls." She pointed out with *Conversation with Sai Baba* in her hand and *Stranger in a Strange Land* in the other. "It might be good for a political scientist to be rubbed against a cursed poet, his opportunity to get a sense of wording, sensibility, and creative use of language." As if she were imparting a lesson to the chapters, she opened every book she picked, and dropped a statement to be preserved in the middle of the pages while she carried them to the middle of the room. She made an effort to illustrate our task with vivid examples: "What would Lydia Davis, the great micro-fiction writer, tell a prolific author such as Mario Vargas Llosa?"

I was a little disappointed to find out she had read most of her collection, she claimed that no book made it to the shelves without being read or at least opened. Her monologue kept escalating, "Sociological manifestos for the sake of the people—books

that can't be read beyond the first chapter like *Das Capital*—really could get some love from chic lit like *Sex and the City* or maybe go into a threesome with a graphic novel like *Persepolis*," she valued her books beyond the marks and tricked me to believe she remembered a piece of them, "Textbooks can teach simplicity to great Russians novels."

Even though, her collection seemed very contemporary and my chances to find a gem slimmed with every word that floated out of her mouth, I was utterly amused at her mannerisms, her language, and her absurd ability to establish correlations. I was pleased to realize she was willing to help and a little annoyed over the thought of her overwhelming presence. I pride myself of never judging a book by the cover, but Rombauer's mysterious premises, brought back to my life a black magic allure that had more author's voodoo than any dream interpretation theory I can remember.

On my way out, she caught me peeking at the living room that was kept in full darkness. "I don't want you touching any other stuff," she said to me in a threatening tone that seemed to imply that my eyes and fingers could rape. I felt lucky enough to browse into her life, and lucky enough not to really take part of it. Caught up by a story that did not belong to me, I tempted the unfair destiny that tends to link by signs, and the progressive causality that lets us explain, and actually believe, that one thing could led to another. In her house, I was the crafted dedication for a lover in the first page of a poems book, the dehydrated flower between pages of a novel, meant to be kept and meant to be forgotten.