

The Autobiographer

by
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Edward thought he knew every part of the library, but he was perplexed to find he was wrong. He loved the library. Doing a research degree meant that he either spent his time with his head in a technical book, scribbling notes, or typing frantically in a stuffy office, so the calm and tranquillity of the library, especially the lower depths of the stacks, was a welcome relief.

He came to walk around, enjoying the smell of old paper hanging in the air and the dust motes whirling in the sunlight. Occasionally he took a book down from the tall wooden shelves, felt the velvety smoothness of the paper, ran his fingers over the inked hollows of the printing.

It was a good place to go to be quiet and at peace with oneself and the world.

Edward had almost finished his degree, and so had walked the aisles many a time. He knew the place like the back of his hand. Yet one day, as he roamed the stacks, he came upon an area he'd never noticed before. This was very strange, especially as he had *definitely* traced that same route many times.

It didn't look new, or even newly rearranged. The little cul-de-sac of shelves looked as if they'd been there forever, complete with dust and only enough books to fill about half of each shelf.

"Well!" he muttered to himself, feeling oddly affronted by this previously unknown area.

He walked in and pulled out a book. It was bound in strange leather, pale and slightly warm to the touch; he found the sensation rather unpleasant. There were no markings on the binding at all, bar a few discolorations, which he assumed were due to the damp conditions in which many of the older books in the library had been stored at one time or another. The leather was stiff, creaking as he opened it wide enough to read the title page.

"*Mr Timothy Queensbury*" it read, with a date: 1978. The book wasn't as old as he had thought. He sniffed at it. It didn't smell new. The pages didn't feel like the usual rough quality of recent times, more like the thin silky paper of centuries previous.

He turned another few pages.

"I was born in the 1950s into a world simultaneously full of joy and disaster. My father was a doctor, a general practitioner--"

An autobiography. Not his favourite reading matter. He preferred tales of adventure and far away worlds where the impossible was true.

He replaced the book, glad to release that strange leather, but curiosity prompted him to pick up another one. It was much the same: another autobiography, identical in format to the first, similar binding, dated 1934. He turned impatiently to the last page and read.

"I couldn't recall having been to this part of the library before, and it certainly did not resemble the Greek poets section that I was looking for. Strange books lined the shelves and I reached for one--"

That seemed an odd way to end a book, even if it was an autobiography. He shrugged and replaced the book on the shelf.

They didn't seem to be arranged in any order. He found books from 1820 placed next to one from 1947. They must be a particular publisher's range of autobiographical works, he thought. While there had been obvious attempt to keep the bindings uniform, there were subtle variations in colouring. He turned over the one he held and stared at one of the tiny dark spots that he had seen on several of the books. He peered closer, and his primitive mind immediately knew what his higher intelligence would not consciously accept. It wasn't a damp spot.

(That doesn't belong on the leather binding of a book!)

His eyes flicked away desperately, seeking some distraction, but his gaze came to rest upon a very similar marking where his thumb branched out from the rest of his hand. His brain finally managed to send the appropriate signals to his hands, and he dropped the book.

The leather binding had a rich brown mole, the bump slightly raised from the surface.

It's possible that other creatures have moles on their skin, he thought rationally.

(But I've never come across any – apart from humans!)

He decided he must be mistaken, and reached down to pick up the book -

(That's no way to treat books, dropping them on the dusty floor!)

- and that was when the bookshelf jumped on him, crushing him to the hardwood floor. It grew heavier, the pressure building, the herringbone pattern of the floor etching itself into his face. His fingernails scraped the floor, desperately seeking a grip with which to pull himself free, but they accumulated only the dust of centuries before falling limp. Edward felt his bones break, ribs snapping, punching through his skin and as it became too much -

(Too heavy! No room! I can't breathe-)

- his vision filled with bright white sparks before narrowing from the edges inward.

The librarian heard the soft whoosh of something falling and, pushing back his chair, stood back from his desk and went to investigate. He slowly walked down the main aisle, listening for anything beyond the brief rustle of pages being turned and a cough or sneeze from the library's occupants. Nothing. He sighed, and silently stepped into the gap on his right. He contemplated the cul-de-sac of shelves. Nothing was amiss, not a page out of place. The ever-present dust lay unmarked. He started counting the pale bound books and took a step forward. One hundred and seventeen. One more than on his last count; he *had* heard something. He reached to the uppermost shelf and took the book that lay on top of the others.

"Mr Edward Collins, 2006."

He sighed once more, closing his eyes, and replaced the book on the shelf. He backed out of the dead end and returned to his desk to fill out a new reference card which would join the others that had been kept in a small locked box since the library first welcomed in visitors.