

Courting

Doug Bowers tried to put the librarian out of his mind so he could concentrate on the radio repair book in front of him. He was almost half-way through the RCA Institutes correspondence course on radio and TV repair and his goal was to finish it by the end of the year. Then he could get a real job. A job with a future, where there was no limit to what he could do if he was willing to work at it. Not like his job at the gasket factory. He took that job right after high school. He was proud of the fact that it was classified as “skilled labor,” and it paid more than the minimum wage. He was determined to become the best lathe operator they’d ever seen. He worked hard, and before long he was the best operator on his shift. He turned out more oil filter gaskets than anyone else. But all that earned him was a chewing out from the union steward. He told Doug that if “management” got wind of what he was doing, they’d raise the quotas and expect everyone to turn out that many gaskets. He warned Doug that if he ever exceeded his quota again he’d be looking for another job. To drive home the point, he dumped half a case of Doug’s output into the “reject” bin. Two hours of hard work down the drain, and when they tallied Doug’s output at the end of the shift he got a warning for failing to make quota. That happened in 1958, almost four years ago. Four years of mind-numbing repetition. He’d never missed quota since then, but he never exceeded it either. Every night was the same. He worked, but there was no incentive to work hard. There was nothing to be gained by working hard. If he kept his nose clean, he’d get a cost of living raise every year, and in ten years he’d be promoted to “senior” lather operator and earn an extra 50¢ an hour.

His thoughts drifted back to the librarian. She was young, pretty, and seemingly unapproachable. He didn’t need to glance in her direction to know that she was wearing a lilac colored ruffled blouse and a Navy blue skirt. He’d sneaked enough furtive glances in her direction to know that outfit by heart. The skirt hung past her knees, but exposed enough of her legs to let him know they were beautiful. Her dark auburn hair curled gently around her shoulders. He guessed she was the assistant librarian because she always worked with a gray-haired lady who wore reading glasses on a chain around her neck, but to Doug she was the only librarian who mattered.

He forced his thoughts back to the repair book. Opportunities to meet pretty girls had been few and far between since he graduated from high school, but this course might be his only chance to escape factory work. He hunched down in the hard oak library chair and buried himself in his studies. A while later he was surprised when he looked at his watch and discovered it was a quarter ‘til nine. The library closed in fifteen minutes. He guessed his younger brother would be finished practicing the drums by now. He understood that his brother needed to practice so he could march with the high school band, but it sure made it difficult to study at home. The fact that his father cranked up the TV volume so he could hear it over the drums just made things worse.

He picked up his books and headed for the check-out counter. In addition to his correspondence text, he had found a library book on troubleshooting televisions which looked like it would be useful. There was no one at the counter when he got there, so he looked

around a bit. He had never noticed before how ornate the library was. He had read somewhere that it was a gift of Andrew Carnegie, and he began to wonder just how rich old man Carnegie had been. Marble steps led up from the front door to a rotunda where the checkout counter was located. The counter itself was polished wood. Walnut? Above it a dome was covered with ornate paintings. He guessed they told some sort of a story and he was trying to figure out what it was.

“May I help you?” Doug was staring at the ceiling with his back to the counter, and the librarian’s voice startled him.

“Oh, yes. I’d like to check out this book.” He accidentally gave her the wrong book. She opened the back cover and saw there was no checkout card. “Oh. Sorry.” Doug mumbled as he handed her the right book. He tried to smile, but she looked so businesslike that it felt inappropriate so he just stood with a blank look on his face.

“Your card, please?”

“Oh. Sure.” Doug fumbled through his wallet until he found his library card. She put it in the little machine that stamped his number on the checkout card which she quickly filed in a drawer. Then she stamped the due date on a sheet in the back of the book. Doug was struggling to think of something to say while she did this. He didn’t get many opportunities to talk to her and he didn’t want to waste this one, but nothing came to mind. Finally, when she handed the book to him, he chose a desperation line.

“Nice day out, isn’t it?” he said in an almost stable voice.

She looked at him quizzically, like he was an unexpected find at the zoo. “It *was* a nice day” she finally replied. “It’s night now.”

“Oh. Yes. That’s what I meant to say. It was a nice day, wasn’t it?” Doug forced a smile and then quickly fled down the stairs and out the door, cursing his stupidity.

At work the next day Doug spent a lot of time thinking about the librarian. He ran six lathes, cutting rough molded rubber tubes into precise rubber tubes so they could be sliced into gaskets. If you were quick and started one lathe after another, you could start the last lathe a minute and a half before the first lathe got to the end of its tube. That gave you 90 seconds to sit down and think before you had to jump up and put a new tube on the first lathe. You couldn’t do any serious thinking in 90 seconds, but it was more than enough time to daydream about a librarian.

Doug thought he remembered her from high school, but he couldn’t remember her name. She was a year or two ahead of him, and he mostly hung out with kids in his own class. He had an impression that she was shy and a little awkward in school, but he wasn’t certain. Certainly

she wasn't as pretty then as she was now. Some women just seemed to blossom as they matured. He wondered if you had to go to college to be a librarian. Maybe she was too smart for him. Then again, he was pretty sure she hadn't been out of high school very long when he first saw her at the library. Did they have correspondence schools to become a librarian? Had she stayed up at night reading books about how to run that little checkout machine and do whatever else it was that librarians did? Just like he was reading about radio repair? Somehow he didn't think so. Whoops! Machine number one just got to the end of its tube. He jumped up and began servicing the machines again.

Doug thought about the librarian off and on over the next several days, but he couldn't think of a way to strike up a conversation with her. His attempt at "winging it" hadn't ended well, and he certainly didn't want a repeat of that fiasco. This time he wanted a plan. He wanted to know what to say in advance, so he could be calm and confident when he talked to her. The only problem was, he didn't have a clue what to talk about.

Surprisingly, it was Danny Morgan, the material handler, who started him thinking in the right direction. Danny had worked at the factory so long he seemed like a fixture there. As far as Doug knew, he had always been a material handler. He wheeled a cart from one workstation to another, picking up finished pieces and dropping off raw materials. Danny liked to talk, and this job gave him a chance to talk to everyone in the plant. He wasn't the sharpest tack in the box, and he often got his facts mixed up, but he had a good heart and a ready smile.

"Didn't you tell me once your granddaddy fought in Arabia during World War One?" Danny asked as he loaded the tubes Doug had cut into his cart.

"It was Batavia, Danny." Doug answered. "My grandpa was at a training camp in Batavia when the war ended. He never made it overseas."

"And here I thought it was Arabia." Danny sounded disappointed. "I was hearing on the radio this morning that they were making a movie 'bout Lawrence of Arabia. Thought maybe your granddaddy knew him." He wheeled his cart to the next workstation.

Doug smiled and shook his head as Danny wandered away. Then he thought for a moment. He'd heard about that movie, too. It was supposed to be some sort of a big spectacle. Peter O'Toole. Omar Sharif. Maybe he could ask the librarian for help finding a book about Lawrence of Arabia. That would give them a chance to talk and get to know each other. Later she'd ask him how he liked the book and they'd talk some more. When the movie finally came to town it would only be natural for him to invite her to see it with him. It was certainly better than talking about the day when it was already night! The rest of his shift went by in a pleasant blur. He even whistled now and then while he worked.

Doug had trouble concentrating on his radio books that night, waiting for the right time to ask her. He thought it would look more natural if he asked for help just before he went home, as that's when he usually signed out new books. At 8:30 he gathered up his things and walked casually to the checkout counter.

“Excuse me” he said to get her attention. “Could you help me find a book on Lawrence of Arabia?”

“Have you looked in the card catalog?” she asked. “It’s over there.” She pointed to a light oak cabinet filled with small drawers of index cards. Doug was in fact very familiar with the card catalog, as he used it regularly.

“Thank you” he said as he headed for the catalog. He didn’t think his disappointment sounded in his voice.

“His real name is Thomas Edward Lawrence” the librarian called out helpfully, “but you may find him listed as T. E. Lawrence.”

Doug was surprised to find they had several books about Lawrence of Arabia. He picked out a thick, impressive looking book written by Lawrence himself. Seven Pillars of Wisdom. Even the name sounded impressive. If he read that in the library she was sure to notice it and ask him about it.

The following evening Doug decided to take a night off from studying and just read the book on Lawrence. Since he didn’t have to take notes, he ignored the study desks in the middle of the library and settled into a brown leather club chair in the corner. A brass lamp beside the chair made it as cozy as sitting in your living room, with the added advantage in Doug’s case of not having a younger brother practicing drums in the room over your head. Unfortunately, the book did not live up to Doug’s expectations. There were no vast hordes of Arabian princes riding colorfully decorated camels and cutting swathes through the Turkish infantry. Or at least, not in chapter one. Instead there was a bewildering chronicle of people and places Doug had never heard of before. He found himself constantly flipping back through pages he’d already read, trying to figure out who was the son of whom, and why Lawrence was in whatever unpronounceable town he was writing about. There was a lot of talking and no fighting in the opening chapter, and much of the talking was indirect. People said things that Lawrence seemed to think were profound but which meant nothing to Doug. He tried to focus on the book, but his mind wandered and his eyes began to glaze.

The sound of a chair being dragged across a hardwood floor startled Doug. He looked around and saw no other readers in the library. Obviously, the library was closing and the librarian was straightening up. He realized with shame that he had fallen asleep in the chair. What’s worse, he suspected the librarian had deliberately scraped the chair across the floor to wake him up. He got up without a word and strode out of the library. When he got home he tossed the book into a corner of his bedroom and collapsed on his bed. Now, of course, he couldn’t fall asleep. He was wide awake now. Why couldn’t he have been wide awake in the library? Why did he have to fall asleep in front of *her*? Did he snore? The thought made him shudder. And of course, it would be impossible to discuss the book with her now. No matter what he said, she wouldn’t believe him. She knew that was a book that put him to sleep.

Fortunately marching band season ended that weekend and Doug's brother no longer played the drums at home. Doug could relax and study at home. His father no longer turned the volume up on the TV, and his mother's eye stopped twitching. More importantly, Doug didn't have to go back to the library. Just the thought of setting foot in that place again humiliated him. After a week or two he forgot all about the library – until there was a postcard from the library in the mailbox. "Seven Pillars of Wisdom" was seven days overdue. Or it had been when the card was mailed. Now it was nine days overdue.

Doug scooped up the book from the corner where he had tossed it and trudged to the library. Now he'd have to face the librarian with the book that had put him to sleep and admit that he'd kept it too long. Would she be angry? Would she ridicule him and ask if he kept it so long because he was trying to cure his insomnia?

He was relieved when he stepped through the door and saw the gray-haired lady behind the counter. The cute young librarian was nowhere to be seen. He had to endure a short lecture about the evils of keeping books overdue, of course. "Other people may want to read this book" and that sort of thing. He didn't think that was very likely in this case because the list of return dates stamped in the back of the book showed he was the first person to check it out since 1953, but he wisely kept that thought to himself. He mumbled an apology, paid his 27¢ fine, and trudged back home. Along the way he vowed never to go back to the library again.

Katie Robertson critically examined herself in the bathroom mirror. She knew she wasn't beautiful, but she thought she had what men described as "a cute figure." And people told her she had a pretty smile. So why didn't she have a boyfriend? She wrestled with this question as she put on her nightgown. It was easy to meet boys in high school. She sat next to them in class, met them at football games, and spent hours after school working with boys on class plays, prom decorations, and the yearbook. She dated several boys in high school, and went steady with a few of them. Nothing serious, but there were stolen kisses in doorways and more prolonged kisses when they drove her home after a date.

She wasn't going steady with anyone when she graduated, though. A few boys invited her on dates that summer, and one boy called for a date when he was home from college on a weekend, but gradually the boys she'd known in high school drifted away. She couldn't afford to go to college, so she got a job in the typing pool at a factory that made brass machine parts. She hated that job. The other typists were older, and they resented her because she was young and because she could type faster than they could. Her boss treated all of them like machines, overloaded them with work, and barked at them to type faster. She didn't even understand half the stuff she typed. Collets, ingots, knurled insets, and sleeve anchors. After about a year of this she saw an ad in the paper for a job at the library, and even though it paid less she jumped at the chance.

The library job seemed like a dream after her experience in the typing pool. She felt like she was helping people, and she loved talking to the groups of schoolchildren who came to learn how to use the library. The head librarian, Miss Watley, was strict but easy to work with as long as you did things her way. The only thing about the job that disappointed her was that very few boys her age ever came to the library. (Even though she'd been out of high school for several years, she still thought of herself as a "girl" and potential suitors as "boys." She found the idea that she was a "woman" and they were "men" slightly unsettling.) For that matter, there weren't many girls her age at the library either. Lots of kids, middle-aged women, and retirement-aged men and women, but very few people in their 20's. There was one cute boy who came in fairly often to study, but he didn't seem to be interested in anything except his radio books. She was still kicking herself for telling him to use the card catalog the one time he asked her for help finding a book. It wasn't until she was lying in bed that night that it occurred to her that she could have used that as an opportunity to talk to him. She could have shown him the card catalog, explained how to search by author or by subject, and who knows what else they might have talked about? But she instinctively followed Miss Watley's instructions. Miss Watley always said that if you find a book for someone the next time they come into the library they'll still be helpless, but if you direct them to the card catalog they'll know how to find books for the rest of their life. It dawned on her that she hadn't seen that boy for several weeks. Was it because she was rude to him?

Thinking about Miss Watley made Katie realize that she probably couldn't have gotten to know the boy even if she had shown him the card catalog. One thing Miss Watley was especially strict on was no socializing on library time. When Katie first started Miss Watley had repeatedly warned her that men would try to "pick her up" while she was on duty, and she should under no circumstances encourage such behavior. "Please confine your conversation to library business" was the reply she was supposed to give to any of these advances. The sad thing was, nobody had ever tried to pick her up. Even the old men didn't flirt with her. She wondered if Miss Watley had ever had to use that line. It suddenly occurred to her that maybe Miss Watley had been young and pretty when she started working at the library, and that she had grown old waiting for someone to try to pick her up. Was that going to be her future? Katie had trouble falling asleep that night.

After several weeks of studying at home, Doug finally decided he needed to go back to the library. He felt like a quitter because he had never finished reading that book about Lawrence of Arabia. He realized it was silly, but he had always read books all the way through, from beginning to end. He had enjoyed some books more than others, but he had never before quit reading a book because it was too hard. Deep down, he wondered if that was the real reason he had given up on that book. He had told himself it was a boring book, but maybe he just didn't understand it. Maybe he needed to work his way up to that book. Read a couple of shorter books about Lawrence of Arabia, learn about the people and places, and then tackle the monster book.

He went directly to the card catalog this time. No point in asking the librarian for help. He settled on "Revolt in the Desert." It was written by Lawrence, but it was much shorter and he hoped it would be more interesting. He carried it up to the checkout counter.

"Another book about Lawrence?" The young librarian sounded surprisingly friendly. Doug eyed her with distrust for a moment, thinking she might be teasing him about falling asleep, but she looked sincere.

"Uh, yes." Doug felt like he really ought to say something more profound, but those were the only words he could think of.

"He must have been a fascinating man." The librarian opened the back cover of the book and removed the check-out card. Suddenly Doug was overwhelmed by the thought that this might be the only chance he'd ever get to ask her out on a date.

"Say, would you like to see the new movie about him? With me?" The words were out of his mouth before he had time to think about them.

Katie looked up in surprise. The abruptness of the invitation caught her completely off-guard. The boy was staring at her with his head cocked a bit to one side, looking like a puppy begging for a treat. She also saw Miss Watkins out of the corner of her eye. Miss Watkins had an entirely different expression on her face. She didn't even know this boy's name and suddenly her job was on the line because of him.

"I – I'm sorry" she replied. "I'm only supposed to talk about library business when I'm on duty." The boy looked crestfallen and she felt miserable. Miss Watkins looked satisfied, though. Her attention had returned to the paperwork in front of her.

"It's not personal" Katie whispered. "It's just library rules." The boy didn't look any happier. She picked up his book and turned to the desk behind her, where the checkout machine was.

Doug was embarrassed and disappointed at the same time. His cheeks felt hot and his eyes were stinging. Why had he jumped the gun like that? He had an opportunity to talk to her, to get to know her a bit, but instead he asked her out on a date. He didn't even know her name! No wonder she shot him down like that. She probably had him pegged as some sort of a creep. She'd never give him a second chance. She probably wouldn't even check out his books again. She'd probably call the old lady over and let her check him out. And what the hell was taking her so long this time? She had just publicly humiliated him, and now it seemed like she was making him stand there forever. Finally she turned back to him and handed him the book.

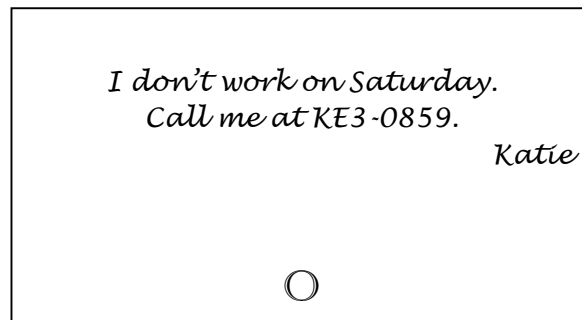
"I hope you enjoy the book" she said.

“It doesn’t sound like she really means that” Doug thought to himself. Then out loud he said “Thank you” without looking her in the eye. He turned his back on her and walked out the door.

Doug sat in his room for a long time that night, thinking about how he’d blown it with that girl. What in the world did he think he was doing? He was lucky she hadn’t called the police. He’d made a perfect fool out of himself. That was for sure. What really hurt was that he’d lost all hope of ever getting to know her. He had his chance, but he’d blown it.

“To hell with it” he finally announced as he picked up the book he’d just checked out. When he opened it, an index card fell out. It was obviously from the library’s card catalog. It had the little hole in the bottom that kept it in the drawer. It was for a book called “The Magnificent Obsession,” but someone had put a big “X” through all the words on the card. Obviously it was scrap paper. Trash. He flipped toward his waste basket, but it didn’t fly straight. It flipped over and fluttered to the floor barely half way to the basket.

“Oh hell!” he thought as he got out of his chair and walked to the card. Then he noticed there was handwriting on the back of the card. Pretty, feminine handwriting.



Doug read the note several times before he could convince himself it was for him. So he hadn’t completely blown it. Her name was Katie. And she was in the Keystone telephone district, so she couldn’t live too far away. And he had a date with her, sort of.

Suddenly the world looked a whole lot brighter.