

THE DOUBLE LIFE

by

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In one of my lives, I'm a writer. This means, essentially, that I contemplate the human experience while wearing my pajamas. The writer in me constantly reads and writes and thinks about stories. This writer—let's call her Deborah Willis—has spent whole, pleasant days worrying over commas. She prefers to be alone. If the telephone rings while she's working, she stares at it, horrified, and refuses to answer. Her shoulders are hunched from bending over a notebook, her eyes strained from the computer screen, and she recently developed carpal tunnel in her wrists. Who says the writing life isn't strenuous? It can lead to, among other disorders, self-obsession and a Vitamin-D deficiency.

Fortunately, there's another me, and she gets out more. She works in a bookstore, which means that she's always on her feet, carrying books up and down stairs, putting them on and taking them off shelves. She can recommend children's books, Canadian fiction, and foreign-language titles. She makes change, deals with till-tape, runs debit cards through machines, sends special orders, and receives magazines. For her, books are to be displayed, alphabetized, and sold. This is an exaggeration, of course—books are not only products. In fact, her work has made her love them more. But she has been a bookseller for almost five years, which is long enough for the job to become an identity.

She wears it like a second skin. Her name is Debbie, and she would be happy to help you.

The bookstore where I work, Munro's Books in Victoria, BC, used to be a bank. It is grand, spooky, beautiful, and almost as untidy as my apartment. It's an old building with character, part of what guidebooks accurately call Victoria's "historic and picturesque" downtown. It has marble countertops, art on the walls, dark wood shelves, creaky floorboards, and a reputation for being haunted. My favorite part of the store is the part customers never see: the basement, which is made up of a series of steel-and-concrete vaults.

When Munro's was a Royal Bank—during that era before banks were housed in huge, anonymous buildings—these vaults must have held receipts, checks, and safety deposit boxes. Now, they're where we keep the overstock. It's like something Lewis Carroll might have imagined, if Alice had fallen down a rabbit hole and into a booklover's fantasy. Vaults with heavy metal doors open onto other vaults, and each one is filled with books. There is something romantic and wonderful and completely backwards about this: finance replaced with literature, scurrying bankers replaced with scurrying booksellers, the sterility of numbers replaced with the unruliness of words.

I fell into this job in the same way I've always fallen in love—by accident. I needed some income to pay the rent during my last year of university, so I dropped off a resume and spoke to the owner, Mr. Munro. I believe he hired me partly because he found my resume amusing (my list of accomplishments included scooping ice cream at a shop called 'Wonderlicks,' and getting fired from a barista job because I didn't take the 'coffee art' seriously enough).

On my first day, I was given the keys to the store, taught the combination to the safe, and told to call Mr. Munro by his first name. It turns out that Jim is an exceptionally kind, trusting, and generous man. To be hired by him is to be immediately welcomed into his family. He runs an independent, old-fashioned business, the kind of place that big-box stores and the Internet can never replace, but often do. It's the kind of place where employees stay for decades. One clerk even identifies himself as "Steve from Munro's," as though the store were his hometown.

I don't mean to make it sound like a museum piece, since Munro's is a profitable business. I also don't mean to romanticize the work. A job is a job, after all, and anyone who has worked in retail during the Christmas season knows that customer service can be its own particular hell. And though it's one of the best jobs I can imagine, a bookstore can terrify a writer. The sheer number of books makes me feel nervous and unnecessary. Classics, mysteries, romances, essays, histories, poetry—they arrive in box after box of hardbacks, trade papers, and mass markets. Then, a year or so later, many are returned unsold to publishers, to be remaindered or pulped. This is the stuff of writers' nightmares. When faced with it in reality, it's hard for me to convince myself that the world needs another book, especially mine. *Why bother?* I often think as I put labels on the newest page-turner about a vampire shopaholic, or the latest novel hailed as "a triumph, full of wry wisdom." These are the moments when the bookseller in me is in conflict with the writer. *Why do you get up in the morning?* she asks. *What's the point?*

If the bookstore forces me to ask these questions, it then conveniently answers them. Most obviously, the books I've borrowed or bought from Munro's have inspired my admiration and my writing. While working amid the stacks, I've discovered Alexandar Hemon, Miriam Toews, David Sedaris, Jack Gilbert, Miranda July, David Grossman, Lewis Hyde, Shalom Auslander, and Anaïs Nin. I've discovered *Before Night Falls* and *Our Man in Havana*, *Revolutionary Road* and *Death in Venice*. The beauty of a bookstore—a real physical store, with real physical books inside it—is that it allows people to browse, pick up a book, hold it in their hands, read a few sentences, and say to themselves, *Yes*.

But Munro's has done more than introduce me to books. It has also introduced me to those who read them. I mean, of course, my coworkers, that delightful and eccentric family. They have dedicated years of their lives to the book trade, and not because the money's good. Many of them buy their body-weight in books each year. They read everything: chick lit, travel accounts, fantasy, philosophy, graphic novels.

And it's not just the employees who hang around Munro's for decades; many customers become part of the family too. There's the gallery owner who buys so many art books that we've given him his own account at the store. There's Mrs. Gupta, who has

perhaps ordered every book on Hinduism ever printed, and who—as though we were her grandchildren—gives us Werther’s Originals from her purse. There’s Jamie, who orders biographies of Charlie Chaplin and Margaret Thatcher and Grace Kelly, but can only pick them up once a month, when he receives his disability check. As if they were kittens in a pet store, he comes in almost every day to visit his books. He holds them, flips through them, says, “Look at this. This looks fantastic.” And there’s Mr. Anderson, a man in his seventies who orders romance novels. He buys them by the dozen. Nora Roberts, Cynthia Harrod-Eagles, Lisa Kleypas, Maeve Binchy, Julia London. He wants love stories, not erotica, but doesn’t mind some titillation. “I like a little slap-and-tickle,” he says.

My favorite customer is Michael. He has long hair, wears a black leather jacket, and one of his boots has a spur. When he walks into the store, you can hear his spiked heel click and spin with every other step. He is polite and soft-spoken, and he looks exactly like Keith Richards. He lives in a motel off the highway, but once I passed him on the street with his hat out, asking for change. If I didn’t work at Munro’s, I would never guess that he spends much of his money on books. I would never guess that he listens to literature programs on public radio, or that he reads everything from Proust to *Gravity’s Rainbow* to *The Irish Country Doctor*.

These people—the employees, and the customers who make their jobs possible—are unlike the kind of reader I became at university, where books are sometimes called ‘texts’ and read because they are feminist, or Marxist, or feminist-Marxist. They are unlike the writers I know—myself included—who can’t read without keeping one eye on the *how*, the craft, the way the author achieves a purpose. The people I’ve met at Munro’s are readers, and it occurs to me that most writers don’t get many chances to meet them, except on book tours. I’ve had the good luck to encounter readers almost every day, and I’ve learned that they are intelligent and demanding. They are rarely snobbish but always discriminating. They read in a deep, engaged, and straightforward way. They read for knowledge or for escape or for both. And to that question—*What’s the point?*—they are an essential part of the answer.

It would be impossible to keep my two selves separate even if I wanted to. And it would be inaccurate to suggest that ‘writer’ and ‘bookseller’ are the only roles I play, the only

sides to my personality. But day-to-day, they are my main identities. And they had, up until recently, remained fairly distinct—one staying home and behaving like an incompetent housewife, the other going to work and paying the bills. Then, last year, they collided.

Vanishing was published in Canada last May. I would like to say that its release date was the best day of my life, but it was fairly ordinary. I went to work at my job at the bookstore. My book was put out on the shelves alongside all the other books—*The Great Gatsby*, *Barney's Version*, *What Your Poo is Telling You*. Seeing it there, with its beautiful cover and its solid 288 pages, made me happy and queasy. It was like watching something being born, while also realizing that it had died.

In keeping with his tireless generosity, my boss at the bookstore threw me a launch party so big and elaborate that it felt like my wedding day. My co-workers got drunk on champagne. I swanned around in a dress, emotional and tipsy, a regular Mrs. Dalloway. My friends and family bought copies of the book and I signed them, just like a real author. One of my coworkers—an intelligent and witty woman whose areas of expertise include French *Vogue*, the Anglican church, and the mystical properties of gem stones—read me the numerology of my book's ISBN.

"This is a good number." She gave me a long and significant look. "It has a positive energy."

But it wasn't until later that week that I understood that my bookseller self and writer self would have to become friends. It wasn't until I stood at the till, behind that marble counter, and sold a copy of my own book.

I believe it was a Thursday, because I was working the late shift. A woman brought my book up to the counter and started fishing in her purse. I didn't recognize her, but assumed I must know her from somewhere. I had a hard time believing that anyone who didn't know me and feel sorry for me would buy my book. I stared at the woman's face, trying to guess where I might have met her. At a dance class? The grocery store? The dentist? Maybe that was it. Maybe she was my dental hygienist.

"Hi there!" I spoke in my cheeriest customer-service voice. "How are you today?"

"Fine." She handed me her Visa card without looking at me, and I rang her purchase through.

If writing and publishing books puts me in danger of becoming wildly self-absorbed, selling anything—books or donuts or furniture—must be the cure. It is an exercise in humility and self-effacement to ask, over and over, with that mix of attentiveness and blandness, “Would you like a bag for your purchase today?”

“Yes, thanks.” This woman was not particularly friendly, and I was beginning to doubt that she was my dental hygienist.

I handed her the receipt and said, “Thank you,” to which she replied, “Thank you,” to which—typical Canadian—I answered with, “Thank you.”

Then she picked up the book, which she had now paid for, and which therefore did not belong to me anymore. Out of a desire to hold onto it, to keep my baby close, I said, “Do you want me to sign it?”

“What?”

“Do you want me to sign your book?”

For the first time, she looked at me. She smiled without using her eyes. “And why would I want your name in my book?”

I could have hugged her. I could have kissed her on the mouth. Because this woman was definitely not my dental hygienist. This woman was a stranger. Unlike my friends, and my parents, and my parents’ friends, and my boyfriend, and my ex-boyfriends, and my coworkers, and my aunts and uncles—such loyal fans!—this woman didn’t *have* to buy my book. Perhaps she had seen the book on the shelf and simply thought it looked interesting.

I blushed like a happy, stupid child. “I’m the author,” I said.

She raised one eyebrow. She looked so skeptical that even I doubted it. I looked down at myself as if to check, to make sure I was the person I claimed to be. “When I’m not here,” I said, my two identities fusing for a moment, “I write stories.”