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Human Library

Nobody liked Sellers. We didn't know where he came from and didn't care to ask, but he had the keys to the theater. I don't know if he owned the building but he sure acted like it, walking through the middle of rehearsals and loudly complaining about the volume. He'd send agitated emails if someone left the AC on overnight, preferring to keep the temperature at a sweltering 85 degrees. Sometimes he'd show up to performances drunk, insist on coming in without paying, then spend the first half laughing at the wrong parts and the second half snoring.

He maintained an office space on the second floor, a book-lined room with an antique desk in the middle, a manual typewriter surrounded by the hardbacks he clearly thought looked most impressive. He claimed to write plays. Sometimes we'd hear him clacking up there, but that could have been anything. He never produced anything we saw.

One night he stopped a rehearsal because he couldn't find his jar of fancy mustard. He insisted one of us had taken it from his mini fridge, a faux-woodgrain Kenwood tucked into a corner of his office that could only be seen from inside the sliding barn door. He raged at his presumed intruder, scolding the entire cast for their negligence. Later I found the mustard in a plastic bag on the stairs. I decided to take some small act of vengeance, a tiny knife I could stick and twist.

It worked like this: each time I was in the building and he wasn't, I'd sneak into his office and adjust his books. The first time I swapped the pile of Russian dramas on his desk with a stack of American short story collections. We were in rehearsals when he found them; we could hear the thunk of books hitting the floor above us, the string of curses. He stormed into the theater, right into the stage area, and shoved the first actor he could find, shouting about someone going into his office, how no one should intrude into his space considering how graciously he'd offered other parts of the building for our use. The director reminded him that we paid for our time, and

that he was interrupting. Sellers stared each of us in the face, demanding to know who had moved his books. Were any missing? No, but they'd been moved around. A chorus of shrugs. Sorry, Sellers.

I kept at it, never repeating the same adjustment. I swapped all the dust jackets once. I brought in books he wouldn't be caught dead reading—Dave Barry and Garfield collections, self-published dreck, boilerplate fantasy novels with dragons on the covers. I moved his bookmarks around, jumping ahead by fifty or a hundred pages. If he had a particularly nice edition I'd put it on the back of the toilet in the dingy little bathroom.

Every time, without fail, he'd stomp and rage. He'd make wild accusations, declare he'd bring the cops in to dust for prints. I didn't think he would, but as the weeks went on I started to put on gloves whenever I crept in. He did put a padlock on the door, the biggest one he could find. Thing is, those locks all use the same master key—didn't take much for me to get one. I slipped in and out of his room like a dream, taking a little more of Sellers's sanity with me each time I left.

The week before we opened, Sellers started sleeping on a cot in the corner, a baseball bat on one side and a bottle of whiskey on the other. When I could hear him snoring I'd crack the door and peek in, the dim hall light falling across his furrowed brow as he twitched and droned. I wouldn't go in—didn't want to risk the cranial trauma—but I would slide a book of puns or an old Goosebumps novel across the rough wood floor and just under the cot, the edge peeking out. I didn't see him at all that week.

On opening night I couldn't resist seeing him face-to-face, looking into his eyes and surveying the damage I'd done. I wouldn't admit to anything, of course, fabricating an excuse to go and ask him for the key to the basement instead. Needed an extension cable, whatever.

Sellers's office door was cracked open, the padlock hanging from the staple. I straightened my grin and knocked lightly as I entered.

The lights were off, the curtains drawn. In the dim hallway light I thought I saw Sellers at his desk, crouched as ever over his typewriter. I squinted and started talking as I walked toward him, a stream of patter and platitudes. I reached the desk and leaned over to see if he'd even looked up

at me. The chair, though, was empty, the figure I thought I'd seen just a condensation of shadows. The door shut with a soft click, the padlock's shackle rasping as it locked and took the low light with it.

I felt my way over to the window, the rough cloth of the curtains a welcome friction. I threw them open, hoping for at least a little moonlight, but no—nothing leaked through, the window before me just as opaque as the curtain. I scraped a finger against a pane and felt brushstroked acrylic in dense layers, edge to edge. I sank to the floor.

A shout for help rose from my chest, but cut off before it left my mouth. In many ways, I was alone. In some others, notably, I was not. I could not see, but I felt the books looming over me in teetering stacks, the accumulation of words an avalanche awaiting its pin drop. I could not shout, could not even move, the risk of sharp, falling edges too great. I waited, listening for the sound of the play below, but I couldn't hear anything.