

and finally, my Being standing and in a vest.

Cesar Vallejo

I Do The Strand and The Strand Does Me

On my first assignment in the winter of 1979 I went in a truck to the apartment of a recently dead person whose family had sold their books to the Strand. It was something I would do about once a week with a driver. It was always men and their apartments always smelled of cat piss and old magazines. To get a job at the Strand you had to pass a test where they lined up titles of books on the left and authors on the right – there was always a trick question of course. And you had to lift fifty pounds over your head without wobbling or complaining. If you passed these tests the job was yours. You showed up for work at 8 in the morning five days a week and you got paid cash in a little brown envelope with holes. If you survived for one year you joined a union but no job lasted that long except for certain “lifers” who fit the profile of administrative workaholics. Not only did I not fit in with this group but the people I did gravitate to - like grunts in the army - had contempt for middle management and we feared the bosses who never deigned to speak to us. The Strand Bookstore on lower Broadway was magic until I started to work there – then I saw the other side of it. I would always arrive at 7:30 with six guys who worked the basement – the lowest

rung in the Strand hierarchy - and we would get greasy coffee from the cafeteria across the street. The pay was minimum wage \$3.65 an hour. Nobody had anything to say to anybody we were just there staring numb and dumb drinking undrinkable coffee - all six of us reading one copy of the New York Times which we passed around.

There was a rule about not reading in the store and I broke it. They caught me reading Svoreckly's *The Bass Saxophone* which had just come out then. One more time and I would be fired. Most of the men that worked there were anti social misfits with literature degrees. One guy with a PhD was saving up money to visit Moravia in Rome. Another – a bicycling fanatic - had studied with Joseph Heller in Brooklyn College and spoke badly about his work. Another supported a family of three on what I couldn't live on. The humor was dark and between long silences there were bitter arguments were over the hierarchy of great books and great authors that were intense and serious to the point of just being shy of physical violence. Everyone knew the history of literature and we used it to bend the arguments to our advantage. When a stranger entered our small group in the midst of an argument we immediately reverted to a silence that was impenetrable.

For one month there was a short skinny pale young genius with us named Peter who couldn't lift fifty pounds at all much less over his head. He could read French beautifully as well as any of the Russians in the original. What was such person doing wasting his time at the Strand? Peter read voraciously while on the job but was not fired. He even curled up like a cat between piles of books and took naps. Most of the other guys considered this person a freak and shunned him. This surprised me because he appeared at first glance to be a good candidate for our group. He never seemed to be in the present tense. Most of the time he had a look on his face as if he had been just delighted by something but was shy to explain exactly what. He was polite to the point of being out of control: A defense mechanism that had taken over the organism it was meant to protect. When a pretty girl asked him something he would answer just to one side as if there were someone standing next to her. The only time his mind and his body seemed to be synchronized was when he was talking about philosophy. I told him that the only philosopher I liked was Diogenes because he had hated philosophy.

-Oh no! There were many philosophers who were very critical of philosophy. Peter gave me a short history of them. He was fanatical about

The Twilight Zone and we would recite dialog from various episodes that seemed pertinent.

-”This is a push business Williams! Push and shove push and shove! All the way down the line boy! All the way!”

-”It's a cook-book!”

His parents were very wealthy and they indulged his desire to live a normal life by getting him these "dream" jobs. He explained that the Strand had been an ideal to him. A place where witty guys would help beautiful women find obscure books about which they would know everything. The beautiful girl would fall in love with this young genius. She would invite him to her small but well kept apartment in the Village where she was doing some research on the life of Kafka. Then she would show him that other side to life that books can only do with words.

-They would be inseparable but they would not kiss in public.

-Why not?

-Because it's disgusting. Any public display of something so personal and emotionally important is vulgar!

-Peter how often do I have to explain to you that we can't get beautiful girls because we don't have normal jobs so we're doomed to wander bookstore to bookstore. Minimum wage into old age!

-May I help you madam?

-Archeology?

-Art?

-What do you mean by "Art"?

-Now you're teasing me!

-Tease? Madam I do not "tease". Did Soren Kierkegaard tease?

-The man was deluded! A masochist who over-educated himself into becoming the proverbial "top-heavy" loser with women.

-No!

-Yes! If I could discuss with cats, if chickens would listen to me!

- *Are you guys working?*

-Yes sir!

-Mein Fuhrer!

-Heil! We follow ze orders!

-O Yeah.

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