

## **A life's work**

Some bred dogs, ran women with whips; his fetish was faking passes and entering that library at unearthly hours. They could never understand how he managed. That was the secret. It lay in the books. Mr. Tumkins loved his computers, how to manipulate them: but you couldn't fool the printed page.

Standing on the cold granite steps Mr. Tumkins knew there was no going back. Mr. Tumkins walked steadily upwards as the sun faded behind the shade of the imposing grey brickwork, allowing a darkening shadow swallow him up, the odour of ancient spells embalm him. Mr. Tumkins accepted the coolness gratefully, breathing evenly as he reached the top. Mr. Tumkins refused to glance behind. There was nothing left to notice. He'd get by the guards no problem. He'd left them a message online. They were expecting him.

He'd programmed his computer to keep up social network feeds endlessly. No one would ever know he'd gone off line. Permanently. Mr. Tumkins wouldn't be missed. Mr. Tumkins was going home.

Machines rattled in the distance, curving out new underground monstrosities. There was little choice but to move earthbound. The sun was obliterating all other options. But Mr. Tumkins stared upwards. Letters two meters high proclaimed their intention, etched into stone, naked; not a spot of colour or electronic webbing, they hung there, defiantly, distinguished from their neighbours. Their monochrome stillness refusal to be subdued, to fight against thousands of LCDs blaring, crying out for the scarce attention spans of a population so saturated they could no longer distinguish the scent of a fresh pine tree from the acid of an over used battery pack. Slap bang in the middle of it all, the building's darkness amid the glare, stung pride and forcefulness, retribution, a blasting reminder that the past would always hang around just in case. In awe, gazes spun up its sleek lines, paused, gasped, then turned aside and got distracted by the confusion. The past could be perfect. Maybe the future too. Mr. Tumkins stared on.

PUBLIC LIBRARY the capitals proclaimed, like a death sentence. In fact, the letters themselves had almost become obscure, lost within the shadows the building proffered as a refuge from the brightness of an never ending sun. Their home star was burning out apparently. It would take generations. Nevertheless, digging down helped provide some shelter from a gamma of rays previously unexpected. The library remained defiantly phallic. It refused to be buried. The sun could fade away but it wouldn't bow out without a blazing inferno.

Apart from the kids on educational tours, few adults managed to make it to the top of the steps. Mr. Tumkins had done it hundreds of times of course, but this one last attempt was special. Mr. Tumkins wouldn't be leaving anymore.

Mr. Tumkins had been brought as a child and a knot had unravelled, had clicked: he'd been trapped in a web of infinitive release, tied to imagination unbound. Something had stirred his blood as the rust spun, the dust hit the fan and he awed in silence at the reams of folios stacked high into the night, screaming out to be touched, mauled, anything rather than the tick tack clicks that served for modern thought. Mr. Thumpkins was hooked on the first whiff of thumb-marked air, that damp, faintly bitter smell of the past gone cold, rotting away, nagging you until you couldn't give it up. Mr. Tumkins mounted the stair case with renewed fury.

Mr. Tumkins heaved a rug sack over his left shoulder. He had enough food for years. The capsules hardly took up any space. That was the modern world, shielding from a sun that had gone beyond its call. Books however couldn't be tamed. They always weighed in at their original size.

Mr. Tumkins was only slightly conscious that what he was doing was highly illegal. All kids were encouraged to visit but nobody was allowed to hover perpetually, which was exactly what he proposed. It tingled the child within

him, that sense of rule breaking when you knew the adults were just stupid and out to get you.

Mr. Tumkins was inside. Forever. Mr. Tumkins would never leave. They would never notice. Mr. Tumkins had deleted the registry of his entrance, and faked his existence elsewhere.

He became part of the fittings. Another loose rung in a ladder that was well out of date. Except of course it wasn't: after all those years, all that technology, there was only one way to reach the top shelves. They still needed to be touched, to feel manhandled. Technology couldn't defy that resolution. Sometimes he sighed under the challenge, the weight of such responsibility. Somebody had to read them all. And it was up to him. He wouldn't let anyone else participate. He clattered up the steps defiantly.



Years rolled by. He gorged, lost his taste for food. His clothes began to sag, he thought he smelled. But his babies hung in there and never turned him away, even when he rolled them over and played dirty on their backsides.

Susie wandered, mystified, clutching her father's hand in apprehension before the rising darkness, the fears of unknown smells, a strange dusty gloom where wi fi seemed to fade or waver beyond reception. Weekend outing. Had to bring her here. Her father strode on confidently.

Look at all those nice books love. People used to read them. It's nice isn't it. Like the animals in the zoo.

What animals.

She pouted. She liked doing that. She liked the way it upset her father. She hadn't liked the zoo either. But you don't tell your dad these things.

You remember. Last Sunday. The zoo. We saw horses and cows. Even that little dog.

She nodded absently, quest forgotten. Overcoming her fears, or perhaps, after all, remembering the dog, she drew closer and stroked a slash of pale leather.

It's cold.

Little fingers gnawed the shiny surface and clutched the softness of pages beneath. Like a well oiled bolt the book slid out off the shelf.

Her father was rattled. He didn't think you could actually touch them. They were books.

No. Don't.

Why not? What's the point.

Remember you couldn't touch the animals either.

She remembered the snakes. She hadn't wanted to touch them. She recoiled, the same smell of fear entangling her brain once more. She wouldn't touch those books. There was something lurking behind.

She was getting tired of Weekend trips. She zapped off a message to let her friends be warned: don't go with your father on Weekend trips. Stay at home with mother shopping online.

Sorry love. They're just precious. They can fall apart. Don't touch.

Why would you want to preserve something that could fall apart. Then she remembered her last mobile device: it had fallen apart and she had lost all those selfies and years of back chat. Maybe books were just as fragile. They needed an update, a new software version.

They pushed the book back into its slot. "A life's Work" by somebody called Mr. Tumkins.

For a minute her father became a child again. He slipped back, had a fugitive glance, and briefly remembered how to open one and flip through pages. Hadn't done it for years. The name rang a bell. Then it was all too much. He slotted it back. Couldn't understand a word.

Don't touch, his daughter reminded acidly, laughing now from the heights of his shoulders as they swirled through the aisles and fought on to finish another exotic cultural tour before settling down to burgers and wi fi. Weekend trips: how easy to keep your father happy. If he would only make them shorter.

They hurried along. It was cold. Dark. A hint of the past haunting their future, threatening to decay the dreams they pleasantly built up. She hushed a breath from behind a shelf; he heard a shuffle from over the road. That book wouldn't let him go and he sensed it was after his daughter. He rushed her around the corner out of the darkness of spineboud alleyways.

Come on.

She'd had enough. She didn't argue.

Out in the sun they blinked in relief as the familiar lightening began casting away well known spells. They were cold despite the searing heat: it had a threatening blast of remorse, revenge, the faint tickle of burning creeping over raw, goose pimpled flesh. The rays were damning. They looked behind to see if anyone was following.

A hardback, even a soft back would be too dangerous in these conditions. He'd get his daughter the digital guide version. That should be safer. That sun was damning. They needed to be underground. The PUBLIC LIBRARY had been a useful distraction but time to get back to reality.

By: E. F. S. Byrne

CONTACT:

Enda Scott

José Maluquer, 15 Blq 7 3-D

41008 Seville,

Spain.

[efs@scottboardman.com](mailto:efs@scottboardman.com)

<http://eflbytes.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.scottboardman.com/lit>