

# I Would Like to Be a Librarian Again for Another Year

by Kimmy Beach

Commissioned by Parkland Regional Library for its 50th anniversary, 2009.



it is early July, 1956  
a letter is written to the members  
of the Central Alberta Regional Library board  
Beulah, the librarian at Bentley, has this to say:

*Over 12,000 books were loaned out during the 10 months and books will  
be available at my home  
during July and on request. I have worked hard during the 6 years I have  
been librarian  
to sell the library and I really believe that it has paid off.*

*But I find I cannot work another year at 50 cents an hour and would like  
to be paid  
a regular monthly wage instead of the hours I put in during the school  
hours.*

*I would like you as a board to make an offer of what you will pay, as I wish  
an increase in salary this next year.  
After 6 years I think I deserve one now really, don't you?*

I certainly think you do, Beulah, but I don't know if you ever did  
meetings were set, doodles were doodled  
on the edges of thin typewriter paper  
numbers added up in the heavy lead of the man in charge of the money  
no fewer than four letters went back and forth throwing out this  
or that possible meeting time to discuss the issue

Beulah, do you mean to say  
that when the library was not running regular hours  
you would store books at your home and invite people in to browse  
at their convenience? for 50 cents an hour?  
I doubt you received any payment at all for this extraordinary service  
you were at home anyway, I suppose the board may have reasoned,  
and who doesn't like a bit of company and a pot of tea of an evening?  
never mind the untold hours of lifting boxes

and boxes of books during summer months  
the massive headaches of keeping track of who took what book  
out of your living room or parlour  
taking stock of damage and liquor rings on irreplaceable books  
I hope like anything you got your raise, Beulah  
whatever the outcome, I bet you helped change things for everyone  
your refusal to accept the status quo must have had the board  
a bit nervous, clutching at their neckties  
trying to reason you out of it

~~~~~

a stain is burned into the cover of my great grandmother Sadie's copy of  
*The Complete Works of Shakespeare*  
the book is now mine, having come to me through my grandmother  
and my mother who believes in giving her children the things  
intended for us while she's still alive to watch us enjoy them  
the book will go to my sister when I am gone, and from there  
I don't know

what I *do* know is that the book will outlive me  
it will outlive everyone who touches it after me as it has outlived  
all who've touched it before me  
the book is my most valuable possession  
and yet it is worthless  
I have repaired it over and over with book tape, gaffer tape, and glue  
in a haphazard manner that would make master book-fixer Jane Greenfield  
clutch her spine repair tape in her glue-stained fingers  
and weep with despair  
I wouldn't get five dollars for it at an antiquarian bookstore  
and partly because of that stain  
Sadie loved her cool, iced gin  
and could easily consume a fifth a day  
I like to think she loved this book  
but perhaps it was nothing more than a coaster

a high brow, literary Gin Fizz holder  
she must have left a drink there one warm evening and forgotten about it  
the condensation seeped down the glass and permeated the cover

I trace the ring with my finger to this day  
of the twelve complete Shakespeare collections I own  
this is the one I return to most frequently  
the *Hamlet* pages torn and threadbare from thirty years of reading  
perhaps I should have paid more attention  
to Jane's instructions on how to mend tears properly  
but I will never mend them  
these rips and smudges and pencil doodles are the marks  
of my love for this book to repair them  
would be to remove my presence from it  
I'd like some part of me  
to remain with it wherever it should land

now my goddaughter and I read the play together over the phone  
I turn these pages carefully, helping her understand  
what Hamlet is mumbling about

~~~~~

if my great grandmother had been a librarian, she would have been  
Beulah, defiant in the face of authority  
hauling boxes around like a work-horse  
telling school children to keep their jam-stained fingers  
off the Shakespeare

unfazed by the tapping pencils of long-ago library boards  
their purse strings tighter than great grandma after a few stiff gins  
Beulah writes:

*So please let me know by the middle of August if it is possible to give  
me an increase in salary.  
If not you had better look for another librarian.*

I fairly shout with glee when I read this sentence  
from now on, I plan to accompany every request  
for more money in my own life  
with "If not, you had better look for another..." "

~~~~~

my great grandmother's given name was Sarah  
though she was Sadie to one and all  
inside her Shakespeare collection  
is a photograph of Madame Sarah Bernhardt  
as Hamlet on stage in 1899  
she stands in furs and leotards, her long blonde hair curled under  
an acknowledgement that though she was playing a man  
her femininity was primary  
her arms are crossed and she looks at the camera  
with suspicion and haughtiness as if to say, "don't mess with me"

the book outlives us all  
Sarah Bernhardt has been dead for nearly a century  
my great grandmother Sarah has been gone over forty years  
and sooner or later we will all join them  
I stop at this photograph each of the hundreds of times  
I have read *Hamlet* from this book  
each time I see it, I am struck by her attitude  
her lack of concern for the way she flouted traditional ideas  
of who should be allowed to play what in Shakespeare

~~~~~

Beulah, defiant to the end, closes her letter to the board thus:  
*I would like to be librarian again for another year if you can pay  
more.*

I wish I knew how this ended  
if only the old and yellowed paper had survived  
on which the decision was certainly typed  
what remains are a board member's notes no doubt jotted  
during Beulah's defense of her request for a raise  
I hope tea was made  
I hope it was served in porcelain cups  
I hope Beulah had a stiff gin that night no matter the outcome  
her precious summer books piled to the ceilings in her home  
awaiting her gentle handling and shelving