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590: Local Notes — The Secret Life of Walter Mitty at the Reference Desk

With Special Thanks to James Thurber

by Steve McKinzie (Library Director, Corrigher-Linn-Black Library, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144; Phone: 704-637-4449) <smckinzi@catawba.edu>

Column Editor’s Note: The characters and incidents (although borrowed from James Thurber) are fictitious and not intended to bear a resemblance to any persons now living or dead. — SM

An eerie silence fell over the committee after the provost concluded his budget analysis. Most of the high-level university administrators wore an expression of intense concentration that masked a weary complacency. The university librarian broke the silence unexpectedly.

“Look, it’s time,” he said, “We clarified some things here. Your budget is insufficient. It just won’t do.”

He looked at the provost with cold, grey eyes. A rakish smile spread across his face. “Either you are going to fund the library in the way that it needs to be funded, or we’ll get somebody who can. I am tired of these half-baked measures, sir — these pious platitudes.” Mitty surveyed the table of fellow administrators. They stared at him in disbelief.

The provost glanced at his colleagues, looking for support. “You can’t be serious, Mr. Mitty. You are not really suggesting that we…”


“You know,” Mitty went on, “it’s like this. You, sir, have a problem. You think the University is about committee assignments, grant proposals, and U.S. News and Report Ratings. Well, you’ve got it all wrong. This university isn’t really about any of those things. It is about people. That’s right — people and their ultimate quest for knowledge — undergraduates struggling to make sense out of their lives, graduate students with a thirst for learning, faculty opening up new avenues for research and examining time-honored conclusions of the past.”

Mitty glanced around the room. “Yeah, what I am talking about is the real people of this university and their collaborative search for truth — the growing information needs of a burgeoning learning community.” Mitty was now looking directly at the provost. “And yes,” he went on his voice rising with emphasis, “Mr. Provost, someone has to stand up and fight for the interests of these students and faculty — to fight for their rights to information. Someone has to care about the people and their information needs.”

He paused, and an awkward silence enveloped the room. Mitty was standing down the Provost. More than that, he was telling him off. None of them could bring themselves to speak. Mitty was grinning again. “Well,” he said, “I have articulated a strong case for adequate library funding. Now, what are you going to do about it?”

“Sir, can you help me?” A voice came from far away. Mitty looked up from his computer screen. “Sir, can you help me?” The voice repeated. A freshman was standing at the reference desk looking directly at Mitty. “I need to find the bathroom in this building.” Mitty pointed to a sign near the bank of computers adjacent to the reference area.

“Well,” he said, “I have articulated a strong case for adequate library funding. Now, what are you going to do about it?”

The plane had been late. He tipped the cab driver generously and stepped into the hotel lobby. Several people seemed to turn his way as

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he asked the concierge for directions. “Is that him — the keynote speaker?” he overheard someone saying. “Yes, that’s him,” came the reply. I recognized him from the Web photo.”

“Oh, there you are, Walter,” a voice greeted him as he stepped into the ballroom. “I’m so glad that you’re here. You had us a bit worried, you know, you’re up in a few minutes.”

Mitty looked around the room. Yes, there was Jenkins, his old rival at American Libraries, eyeing with a studied indifference, and he caught sight of Andrea Pritchard from Princeton on his left. She looked up and gave him a wave. She and Mitty had been close friends at Harvard’s Frye Institute, but he knew some of what he had to say today in his address wouldn’t go over well with her and the old guard she represented. His plan for common ground between publishers and librarians would anger both, and his bold strategies to capture a new generation of users would trouble the traditionalist, but no matter. There was nothing he could do about that, he thought. They had to hear the truth. No matter what they would say later.

Someplace a voice brought him around. Someone was speaking to him. “Hey, like the printer’s not working or something. I mean, like I can’t get to — well, like it doesn’t work at all. I mean the thing won’t print.” An undergraduate stood in front of the reference desk, eyed Mitty good-naturedly, and smiled. He wore a Budweiser shirt and a pair of cut-off Levi’s.

Mitty glanced over at the printer. He got up and faced the machine cautiously.

“Ooh, yes, the printer,” he said. “Well, the folks at circulation would probably know what to do. Did you check with them?”

He hated printers. Why couldn’t the things work for more than a couple of print jobs? They were so blasted frustrating — running out of toner — jamming when you least expected. “Confound the whole lot of them,” he muttered.

Just then, a student came over from circulation to look at the printer. “Oh,” he said, “not a problem. We can fix it.” Mitty felt a measure of relief.

“Well, er, thanks,” he mumbled and walked carefully back to the reference desk.

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Endnote