

## McGinty

I first saw him standing apart from the other derelicts at the entrance to the library. He was a giant of a man, at least six and a half feet tall. Despite the cold, the sleeves of his ragged flannel work shirt were rolled up, revealing forearms as thick and muscular as those of a hammer-wielding Thor. His beard was also of herculean proportions, a hirsute explosion that began directly under his eyes and disappeared, without abating, into the neck of his shirt.

He was vividly different from the other men I pass each morning. These others have, sadly, become anonymous over time — murky, resigned-looking men with unshaven faces, disheveled hair and evasive eyes, standing with hands in pockets and shoulders hunched against the wind. They seem part of the landscape, like bare trees in winter. I have certainly not been moved to give a name to any one of them. But when I first observed this red-bearded giant leaning against the building, his eyes cast down intently, a name came to my mind: McGinty. The Great McGinty. The epithet was based solely, in the beginning, on his elemental physical presence.

That aspect of him was so strong that the metal-rimmed spectacles he wore struck me, initially, as incongruous. Size, like sexual beauty in a woman, is not easily associated with the intellect; eyeglasses on a massive man seem out of place. Besides, it is rare to see derelicts wearing glasses — those fragile devices can't survive the rigors of the streets. Indeed, McGinty's were badly damaged. The right lens had been shattered, a sharply-etched pattern of shocks radiating out from the center, where the pupil fixed itself upon the world; also, one of the temples was missing and had been replaced with a length of wire, which caused the glasses to rest slightly askew on his face.

As I passed him those bespectacled eyes were looking at his battered boots, at the concrete. He seemed immersed in thought and was mumbling to himself — a rumble, really, coming from that huge chest — but I couldn't make out any word. My last curious sideways glance revealed that he carried, tucked under his belt, a worn legal-sized notebook, darkened by time and handling. It was unusually thick, apparently stuffed with additional papers. There must have been fifty rubber bands around it, stretched lengthwise and widthwise in a dense network of bindings. This was clearly, like the eyeglasses, an indication of the intellectual nature of this man, as was the motley collection of pencils and pens sticking out of his shirt pocket. He had come prepared to do serious work, and this was another way he stood apart from the others waiting for the library to open. They were gathered around the entrance for reasons that had nothing to do with the intellect. When the door was unlocked at nine o'clock they would shuffle in at each other's heels, picking up some book on their way to the tables, for the guards will not allow loiterers. And so they will sit the whole day, the books open before them, pages unturned, while the cold winds beat upon the windows.

With McGinty it was entirely different — he used the library with fanatical intensity for the short time he was with us. On that first day he brushed past the guard as the bolt was withdrawn on the door and rushed into the main room; he looked about for a moment and then plunged into the stacks. He randomly chose the fiction section but immediately bounced away, as if burned, and I never, from my place at the reference desk, saw him return — though, I was told, he would always select a book from there around six o'clock, when I was gone, and would read quietly until closing time at nine; apparently there was a system at

work. The sections he used the most while I was there were history, psychology, religion, philosophy, anthropology. He'd nose along the stacks, peering at the titles, crawling on his knees to see the bottom shelves. He sniffed out what he was looking for, never consulting the card catalogue. When he found a book he wanted he'd grab it up covetously, with a sharp glance to either side, as if someone were about to swoop down upon it. Then, holding it up close to his face, he'd quickly rifle through the pages. Sometimes he'd stop abruptly, his whole body becoming alert, a visible "Ah ha!" Occasionally a smile would shift the position of his beard and a chuckle rumble up from his chest. More often, though, his study of man would elicit demonstrations of repugnance: an ominous frown, a disapproving shake of his head. Sometimes he'd thrust a book away from him, as if in revulsion. Once, in extremis from something he had read, I saw him walk to the wall and lean against it, his forehead pressed against the white cinder blocks, moaning.

Every morning, after collecting some books, he would find an unoccupied table. If anyone came near he'd glare at them; if, despite this, the person would sit at the other end of his table, he would hurriedly gather up his books and leave; sometimes he was forced to read standing in a remote corner, always alone.

During the day he'd occasionally have to consult his notebook. This would demand the strictest security — a careful surveillance of his surroundings would take place before he would begin the intricate process of removing the rubber bands. He'd place them around his wrist, one by one, with care not to break any. Finally he'd open the notebook and, shoulders hunched protectively and head bent low, he would take a pencil or pen from his shirt pocket and make his marks upon those secret pages.

I learned all this about McGinty by observing him from the reference desk, by forays into aisles next to where he was, or by checking out the titles of books he discarded. Sometimes I asked one of the library assistants to keep what they found on McGinty's table separate on their cart, for my leisurely perusal. I was curious. I even wondered, on the first day he was in the library, if he knew how to read, or if what I was witnessing was a mad charade. But a look at his selections dispelled such doubts. He could not have consistently chosen, at random, such books as he did. He dealt only with giants. After learning this I felt a respect for him, even a feeling of alliance, for some of these same books had engaged my mind. It also served to make me deeply interested in finding out about the fiction he read at night; I wondered if the worlds created by novels were ones we shared. But I could not get anyone on the night staff to remember to take up the book he would set down when closing time was announced. Not that the library wasn't concerned about the man; they were. He was part of the general derelict problem, though a special case because of his size and apparent madness. What the others cared most deeply about was not his choice of novels, but where they would be on the day when he would run amok.

Though I saw him mainly as an intellectual phenomenon, this dangerous aspect of McGinty was not lost on me. I did my spying surreptitiously. My most daring act was to go into an aisle next to the one where he was and peer at his back through the books separating us. But, for all his fearsome looks, in the time he was with us McGinty made only one overt threat of violence. It came when a student, employed after school to re-shelve books,

blundered around the corner and into the aisle where McGinty, only a few feet away, was just then consulting his notebook. The boy heard a sudden hurried shifting as McGinty protected those pages from alien eyes; then McGinty wheeled upon the boy, his face filled with a desperate rage — the eyes burned with it, the beard bristled with it. Rising beside that face, with deliberate slowness, was a massive, grimy fist. The boy, with the deft reflexes of youth, did an instantaneous turn-about and vanished.

I spoke to the still-shaken young man later, in what I must say was a decent Bogart imitation. “Sure, kid,” I said, gazing philosophically out at the stacks, “it can get dangerous. But if you want to be a librarian, it comes with the territory.” He looked at me resentfully.

“You’re as crazy as he is.”

I think not. Though McGinty and I do have similarities. He was much on my mind, particularly during my evening walks. On doctor’s orders, every night at nine (the same hour the library turns out its occupants to the cold and dark and concrete), I leave my house — a tidy little brick ranch style — to make my way through the quiet streets of my subdivision. And on those particular March nights, feeling the brisk winds, I wondered where McGinty was. I could not imagine him in one of the city’s shelters, among the rows of muttering and snoring men. No, I saw him alone, in some hidden lair he had found, perhaps gazing up at the same sky as I.

And, oh, how the constellations stood out so clearly on those cloudless nights! I tilted my round face up toward the moon. Approaching fullness, it cast a sweet, beatific light upon me. A light so brilliant that, indeed, I believed one could read by it — could warm oneself on the tropical island of Nepenthe, perhaps, or by the Marabar Caves, or on the beaches of Venice. Soon I would be moving through the labyrinth, dust-tormented streets of Alexandria. And so I wondered about McGinty, bookless. It seemed such a hard fate, to pass those long, brightly-lit nights with no books. Even worse was what loomed ahead: on Saturday, at six o’clock, the library would lock its doors until Monday. So bitterly long a time to exist only in the real world.

It was these thoughts that led me to contemplate getting some books to McGinty, for him to use on Saturday night and Sunday. He, of course, had no library card, and could not, without a permanent address, be issued one. My lending him books would be breaking library rules — which would be no problem for me, either ethically or logistically. No, the problem, an intriguing one that brought a reflective smile to my moonlit face, was that I’d have to make contact with McGinty, would have to violate, in a way, the man’s solitude.

A simple plan, formulated on my evening walk and slightly revised that night, still seemed sound as I drove to work on Saturday morning. So when I arrived at the library I first went to the stacks of books that had recently been returned by patrons and were awaiting re-shelving — books which McGinty could not yet have seen. I was fortunate to find an interesting title, Freud’s case study of the Wolf Man. I took it to the table most frequented by McGinty; inside I placed a stiff index card with the following note written on it:

“If you wish to use two books from the library until Monday, bring them to me before five o’clock. I am the heavy man at the reference desk.”

My little trap laid, it was a matter of waiting for McGinty to take the bait; and he did, twenty minutes after he had entered the library. He set the books he had gathered on the table and picked up the Freud. The book opened to where the card was; he took it in his hand. At that moment I pretended to be busy with some reference volume, but when I snapped it shut and turned to put it back upon the shelf, my eyes briefly flickered toward McGinty. He was staring at me.

He could not be mistaken as to who had sent the note: I am, undoubtedly, the heavy man. I must now confess that I have thus far withheld a defining fact about myself; I have allowed myself to exist upon these pages as a normal person. But the time has come to divulge that, at five feet eleven inches tall, I weigh 282 pounds. Which, to put it in perspective, is actually slender for me. I have recently undergone a drastic weight loss, one attributable to the careful monitoring of my food intake, chemical control of my aberrant glands, and to those two daily walks in which I lumber along vigorously, with much seismic shifting under my clothing. This current slimming program is not prompted by a desire to attract a member of the opposite sex — I am, after all, fifty-two years old and have finally ceased to long for certain things — but is due to a coronary event six months ago in which my overburdened heart displayed a fit of pique. So, like when I was a twelve-year-old boy sitting in my underwear on a doctor's examining table, approaching the three hundred pound mark, I again sit there at the other end of life, this time retreating from that mark. It gives rise to thoughts about this journey through life we all take, as best we can. A journey I have survived, in my fashion.

A journey that McGinty, too, survived, in his fashion. And now his eyes found me across the library.

His first reaction was to quickly look away from my glance; he then disappeared for a long while into the rows of books. During the following hours I kept track of him out of the corner of my eye, and I sensed a restless preoccupation. He did not seem so concentrated on his readings; he was not fully immersed in his life's work. For this I knew I was to blame. Our kindnesses are often more complicated than we intend them to be; McGinty was burdened by thoughts of me. By four o'clock I sensed an even greater buildup of tension. He was moving about the library indecisively, carrying some books under his arm, often disappearing down an aisle. And finally, as the second hand moved upward to signify five o'clock, I smelled a musty odor, felt that an enormous breathing presence had entered my sphere. My heart thumping, I turned to gaze upon McGinty. Up close, he was bigger than I had imagined, vividly alive. He looked off to the side, not at me, but even so the eyes blazed a warning. He was leaning against my counter in a grotesque parody of casualness. There were two thick books on the counter beside him.

"I'll take these for you, sir," I said smoothly, gathering up the books. "And I'll meet you in the parking lot behind the library in exactly thirty minutes." McGinty did not acknowledge my words in any way, but simply walked away.

The parking lot was dimly illuminated by the light from a distant street lamp. McGinty emerged from around the corner of a building and approached me. Thus we two

cartoon characters came together, casting our strange shadows upon a brick wall. I held out a shopping bag; he took it. As he did so his eyes rose from the concrete to meet mine; they no longer expressed hostility or suspicion. Behind the barrier of those shattered, crooked glasses they were searching; they were trying to understand something inexplicable. "I hope you enjoy these," I said. The words seemed to affect him in some deep way; his chest heaved and his beard shifted as if he were about to speak. But all he could summon was one abrupt nod. Then he turned, head down, and disappeared into the shadows.

He did not return to the library on the following Monday. Nor on Tuesday. He did not come back that week. To this day two volumes remain missing from our shelves: Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

These nights, as I lumber along the streets, I imagine McGinty also moving across some dark landscape, although he is surely on his way to a place much farther than I will ever go on my little walks — to a neighboring city, to a new library where he can continue, undisturbed, his study of man.

Days I've been reading Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*. I must admit that I find him to be hard going. It says in the introduction that he was a crook-backed little bachelor who, like me, took walks — that every day he went zigzagging down the sidewalks of Copenhagen with his hands clasped behind him. He was obviously deep in a world of his own creation. I find that I can accompany him only so far into his labyrinth of abstract thought. I dip into his pages during my lunch break (half a tuna fish sandwich, no mayonnaise) or at times in the day when no one has a question for me. Occasionally I look up from my reading to see those murky, resigned-looking men still sitting with books open before them. Sadly, the pages are never turned. The books are merely empty props giving them admission to the only shelter they know.

But in the evening, like McGinty, I turn to fiction. I am rereading *Anna Karenina*, experiencing again that world of passion. Last night I reached the part where Anna and Vronsky first see each other at the railway station. It will all end at a railroad station, when Anna leaps onto the tracks in front of the oncoming train. It is interesting to learn (this too from the introduction) that Tolstoy collapsed on a train. He had used what was left of his enormous strength in a desperate attempt to flee. His dying words, at the stationmaster's house: "Escape. I must escape."

For me, the spires of Moscow loom ahead.