THE LAST LIBRARY

Perhaps it was inevitable. For what is life but a never-ending cavalcade of change and loss?

People around the world stopped purchasing -- then soon, completely stopped reading -- physical books and other print media such as newspapers and magazines. Bookstores and publishers went out of business. Writers went broke and gave up hope, and ultimately abandoned their chosen profession. Finally, one by one, libraries across the globe were closed and repurposed.

This all came about over a generation's time as governments realized that the simplest way to control their populations was to restrict their access to information. The primary mode of communication was now exclusively via large-screen televisions. The internet -- especially social media -- was deemed too dangerous and was dismantled. Movie theaters went extinct. Personal DVDs and CDs were confiscated and destroyed. 'Entertainment' -- such as it was still labeled -- had been converted into an alternating series of 'politically compliant' yet lurid adult dramas, and violent, gladiator-style sporting events, regularly interspersed with propaganda slogans and exhortations. Although available 24/7, all citizens were required to watch such tawdry television programming a minimum of three hours a day, and were forced to click every ten minutes on a handheld device which ensured the respective government that each household was faithfully watching as decreed. Legalized drugs and alcohol use were promoted. Prostitution was also universally legalized. The rulers wanted their populace distracted, weak, and docile. Censorship was strictly enforced. The totalitarian State was all-powerful. Robotics had replaced most jobs, and the food supply chain was controlled, then doled out, by the Government. Dissent had been virtually eradicated. Voting and elections had been abolished, replaced by governing panels serving life terms, who in turn chose their own successors when it became necessary.

The United States of America had been renamed the 'Collective States.' The Constitution had been replaced, and all freedoms guaranteed by its once-hallowed Bill of Rights had been rescinded, especially the right to bear arms. All private firearms were collected and destroyed. The American flag, and all monuments and statues honoring the country's past, were replaced with those of the New World Order.

In regards to libraries in the Collective States, the Library of Congress in Washington, DC and the New York Public Library were the first to fall. Rather than burn the books, huge areas near garbage landfills were excavated, then filled up with the printed volumes -- using dump trucks and bulldozers -- and buried. State after state was mandated to get rid of every library book by year's end, with no exceptions. All private home book collections were likewise confiscated as subversive. Neighbors were given incentives to spy on each other and report any non-compliers.

Books made people think and feel and potentially question the ruling Establishment, every world government agreed. Books encouraged individualism rather than the new collectivism, and were therefore dangerous. Books also reminded people of the past and their nation's history -- something that had to be erased for the benefit of conformity to the new international order .

The book purge swept across the land like a forest blaze in a hot, dry gale until there was but one library left in the entire Collective States. The last library...

It was located in a remote area of North Dakota, in the small town of Valley City. It was now the early afternoon of December 31, and State authorities would be arriving by sundown to ensure that the Central Government directive had been carried out. The town's venerable Carnegie library -- built in 1903 -- had to be emptied of every book and locked up by then. It was a bitterly cold and darkening day, with snow rapidly approaching from the north.

Built in the classical Jeffersonian Revival style, the Valley City Library was situated on a one-acre plot which included several large, attractive evergreen trees. In addition, two small stone lions calmly flanked the front walkway towards the steps leading up to the main entrance.

The librarian in charge for the past fifty-seven years -- Frances "Fanny" Vickers, a matronly, bespectacled, silver-haired spinster with ruddy cheeks and a quick, playful smile -- had finished packing up the personal belongings of her beloved domain into a large handbag. Her hazel eyes swept over the sturdy oak book stacks, their shelves filled with fiction and non-fiction offerings, reference volumes, and atlases. The matching wooden tables (with their soothing, green glass-shaded reading lamps) and chairs had been well-used over the decades by generations of town folk. As she took a final gaze around the library rooms, Fanny recalled the old alphabetically-ordered card catalogue drawers, which now rested in storage in the basement. She had meticulously typed up each entry by hand using a typewriter-- title, author, subject, and Dewey number -- before the whole system was replaced by computers years ago.

It was a sad day indeed, she thought, as she waited for the loading crew. Who could of foreseen such a devastating development -- locally, nationally, globally? Fanny had cried when she learned that the British Library in London was emptied out, as the gleeful government announcer on television reported its demise. Centuries of precious, carefully accumulated human thought and advancements obliterated forever, in just a few hours! It was horrible -- like an unholy, unprecedented massacre of defenseless innocents. The outrage had quickly been repeated in every world capital -- Paris, Rome, Buenos Aires, Beijing, Tokyo, Delhi, Canberra, Moscow, Cairo, Ottawa, Mexico City, and more -- then on it continued into other cities, suburbs, towns, and villages. Vickers was crushed and heartbroken, as were her fellow librarians and other lovers of learning and literature world-wide.

A handful of her elderly remaining library patrons had shuffled in earlier that morning at opening time, and Fanny allowed each of her long-time friends to secretly take a single, favorite book to keep. The authorities wouldn't bother hunting down such puny infractions, Vickers reasoned, so she actually encouraged it on the sly. And if she was caught breaking the rules, so what? Her job was now obsolete anyway. She was so old that she wouldn't be imprisoned or 're-educated.' Maybe the worst they would do was to take away her food ration coupons for a week as a punishment. The Government could simply go to hell, she figured. Stupid, cruel, heartless bastards...

"And they can kiss my sagging ass too!" Fanny declared aloud, her sassy oath echoing in the now empty building.

As for herself, Vickers smuggled a copy of Dickens' *David Copperfield* into her handbag, to keep her in splendid literary company during her remaining years.

It was then that her old friend, Jed McKenna, popped in for a farewell library visit. Jed was a retired wheat farmer and bachelor. The pair had dated a few times in their younger years, but that was as far as it went. Still, they enjoyed each other's company and had shared many interesting conversations over time. McKenna was a sturdy, tall man but slightly stooped with age. As was his habit, he wore his favorite faded denim bib overalls, revealed when he removed his barn coat, thick gloves, and wool scarf once indoors. He had large, work-worn hands. His blue eyes had remarkably retained their youthful twinkle. He kept his knitted navy watch cap on his head, partly covering a shock of unruly white hair. His stubbly cheeks and chin needed a shave, going on three days or so. He was blessed with an extremely sharp mind, however -- fooling strangers into assuming he was an ordinary, somewhat dim-witted farmer. Naturally, Jed was a life-long, voracious reader. In fact, he was interested in just about everything.

"Damn, Fanny, but it's a cold one out there today!" Jed remarked. "Bet you a chocolate donut that it's gonna snow soon too."

"That's a fool's wager, Jed, and you know it -- seeing as it's late December in North Dakota," Fanny countered with a smile. "Besides, there hasn't been a chocolate donut around these parts for years, ever since Dutton's Coffee Shop went bust. Any donuts around here must be as rare as hen's teeth nowadays."

Outside the library, the sky was further darkening, and raw wind gusts rattled the old Carnegie windows.

"Well, my fine old friend, today's the last day of the harvest," Vickers continued. "Got a good book in mind to take? Last chance to choose. I already gave away *The Odyssey*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Good Earth*, *Anna Karenina, Pride and Prejudice, Moby Dick, Dandelion Wine,* and a *King James Bible*. And I chose my Dickens too" -- she yanked *David Copperfield* up and out from her large handbag as proof -- "so you'll have to come over to my house sometime if you ever want to borrow it. You know I always enjoy your company regardless, Jed."

"Thanks, Fanny. I'll keep that kind invitation in mind. Well, I think I'll go with Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. Nice and meaty, with lots of different themes to ponder," Jed decided.

"Ah...such an classic choice," Vickers approved, as she smartly walked over to the fiction stacks and retrieved the worn leather-bound volume, then returned and proudly handed it to her farmer friend.

"The packing crew and trucks will be here soon," Fanny suddenly announced. "It's the end of an era, Jed. I'm sure going to miss this place, as I'm sure a few others will too. For generations, it was an oasis of calm and purposeful leisure, of learning and reflection. Our library was the steadfast hub of Valley City, a welcoming place where everyone in the community could freely gather and mingle. I watched the children in town get their first library card, then marveled as they grew up as students doing research, then saw them graduate from school and get married, and bring their own children, in turn, to get their library cards. Fifty-seven years. Where did all that time go?" the veteran librarian wondered, sighing.

"Lord only knows...But an even bigger question, Fanny, is: What went wrong? What the hell happened to our country and to the whole dang world?" Jed asked.

"It's not hard to say," Vickers began. "Kids became addicted to video games and gave up on reading books. Their attention spans were ruined by time-sucking social media sites on the internet, and wasted on cell phone texting. The education system devolved to becoming little more than a vast indoctrination camp driven by the power and control needs of the Government. Adults became irresponsible as parents, and grew intellectually lazy, selfish, and apathetic. Democracy flittered away, bit by bit. The masses chose vague promises of 'guaranteed' safety and security over the proven accomplishments of freedom, initiative, and independent achievement. People forgot the similar failures of the past because all historic perspective had been lost. The brilliant ideals of America were distorted and gradually erased. We had diversity but no unity, with ethnic groups self-segregating and refusing to assimilate. Public documents were forced to be printed in twenty-seven different languages -- a warning flag that was ignored. We frankly became the Tower of Babel and the Balkans chaotically mixed together. Big Government stepped into the vacuum, and brow-beat the befuddled people into obedience and compliance."

"I agree, Fanny, and I think the cultural collapse accelerated when religion was first discouraged, then later banned outright. God was said to be a silly superstition, a harmful myth for gullible, fearful cowards. Churches, mosques, temples, shrines -- all shuttered. Not even made into museums, just left to rot without repairs with the hope that they would simply fall into ruin and be forgotten after a century or two. The State was the only rational answer to every need, the governments of the world decreed. Fearful and confused, the people followed like lemmings. I never thought I'd live to see these terrible days..." McKenna added, angry and disgusted.

The packing crews with their trucks, forklifts, and crates arrived. Dressed in somber, dark grey Government uniforms, the unsmiling crew of a dozen men presented themselves to Fanny. The spokesman in charge read a decree formally aloud from an official document.

"Citizen Vickers, you are required to surrender the building keys to us now and vacate the premises. We must empty the building by sunset, and take all books to the central Jamestown landfill pits for burial, before our Superiors arrive to check on the completion of the closure."

"What will happen to this wonderful old building after you are finished?" Fanny wanted to know, putting on her winter coat and hat after handing over the keys.

"It has been designated to become a re-education facility," the bureaucrat replied without emotion. "For those who still need a stern reminder of the sole importance of the State for providing social justice and well-being for all of its citizens."

Jed McKenna walked Fanny Vickers home, just as the first snowflakes began to fall. The temperature had also dropped, with the wind moaning as it whipped the bare branches of the neighborhood maple and sycamore trees.

"I'd ordinarily wish you an early Happy New Year, Fanny, but I have the feeling that the future will not be very pleasant. At least not worthy of any kind of celebration. I do thank you, however, for my beautiful book." He produced *Les Miserables* from under his warm barn coat, proudly clutching it like the rare treasure it was.

Jed then bent over and gently kissed Fanny on her cheek, which resembled a kind of smooth, ruddy apple. This affectionate gesture surprised the ex-librarian rather nicely. His blue eyes twinkling, Jed shyly smiled and wished her a good evening, then continued on in the snowy night towards his home...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

November 12, 2020