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The Mobile Library:

The Case of the Missing Books

Ian Sansom

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Extract

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1

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1

No. No, no, no, no, no. This was not what was supposed to happen. This was not it at all.

Israel was outside the library, suitcase in hand, the hood on his old brown duffle coat turned up against the winter winds, and there he was, squinting, reading the sign.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERTAINMENT, LEISURE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

LIBRARY CLOSURE

It is with regret that Rathkeltair Borough Council announces the closure of Tumdrum and District Public Library, with effect from 1 January 2005. Alternative provision is available for borrowers in Rathkeltair Central Library. A public information meeting will be held in February 2005 to examine proposals for local

library and information services and resources. See local press for details.

Further information is available by contacting the Department of Entertainment, Leisure and Community Services at the address below.

The following associated planning application and environmental statement may be examined at the Town Hall Planning Office, Rathkeltair between the hours of 9.30 a.m.–10.30 a.m., Monday to Thursday. It is advisable to make an appointment before calling at the office.

Written comments should be addressed to the Divisional Planning Manager, Town Hall, Rathkeltair BT44 2BB, to be received by 5 February 2005. Please quote the application reference number in any correspondence.

Applic No: X/2004/0432/0

Location: Carnegie Public Library, Hammond Road, Tumdrum

Proposal: Proposed mixed-use development including residential, live-work units, class 2 use (financial, professional and other services), class 3 use (business), class 4 shop and community facilities.

T. BRUNSWICK, BA, MBA,
Chief Executive and Town Clerk
Rathkeltair Borough Council, Town Hall,
Rathkeltair, Co. Antrim BT44 2BB

Unbelievable. That was just … unbelievable.

He couldn't take it all in; his eyes seemed to skid across the lines.

He had to read it all again and still the only words he took in were 'Library' and 'Closure' – and they hit him hard, like a blow to the head, literally rocked him back on his worn-out old heels, the worn-out old heels on his one and only pair of worn-out best shoes, his brown brogues, too tight and permanently unpolished, shoes that had done him since graduation for all and every special occasion, for weddings, funerals, bar mitzvahs and for the interminable and unsuccessful job interviews.

Israel had a headache and he was tired from the journey, his whole body and his one and only best brown corduroy suit wrinkled and furrowed from the coach and the ferry and the train and the bus, and he put down his suitcase, shrugged his shoulders a little to wake himself up, and he read the sign again more carefully.

'Library', 'Closure'.

Oh, God. He took another Nurofen and a sip of water from his water bottle.

He'd read and understood the whole now – that greasy little 'with regret' and the weaselly 'public information meeting', the obfuscating 'proposed mixed-used development' – but it was the two words 'Library' and 'Closure' that really carried all the meaning, that hit hardest. He shook his head to clear his mind and pushed his mop of messy home-cut curly hair from his eyes and his little round gold-rimmed glasses up high onto his furrowed forehead and he took a long, wobbly step back and lifted up his face and looked at the building in front of him: two

storeys of unforgiving bluff red brick, blinds drawn, big oak doors locked, no lights, no sign of life.

He looked up high and he looked up hard, and then he dropped his head down low. This place was definitely closed. Permanently. And for good.

There was a stray dog then, a little terrier, sniffing around Israel's old suitcase while he stood there, and around his corduroy turn-ups, and he really didn't do well with dogs, Israel, he didn't get on with dogs at all – he was a typical vegetarian – and this thing was a mangy flea-bag, and half-blind by the look of it, and scraggly and arthritic – it reminded Israel a little too much of himself, actually – and he shooed it away: 'Go on, go! Get away!' Then he rubbed his eyes and glanced around and behind him, to see if it was for real, this grim, godforsaken place, to see if he'd made some terrible, simple, idiotic mistake, had come to the wrong library maybe, or the wrong town, too tired after his long journey to be able to see that people were in fact flocking into some secret, fabulous library entrance, some little tunnel or nook, some rabbity-hole known only to the locals.

They were not.

No one was approaching with armfuls of books or tickets in their hands: there were no sour and pear-shaped OAPs; no straggle-haired young mums at their wits' end with smeary, miserable children dragging along for story time; no one clutching important-looking unimportant documents to be photocopied in triplicate for their solicitor or the DSS; no wrinkled, stubbly, fragrant winos; no schoolkids half-heartedly working on projects about ancient civilisations or the Second World War or the

processes of human digestion. No madmen. No one. None of them. The building was empty. The car park was deserted. The library was shut.

There is a terrible poignancy about a building intended for the public that is closed to the public: it feels like an insult, a riposte to all our more generous instincts, the public polity under threat, and democracy abandoned. Back home in London, Israel had always found the sight of Brent Cross shopping centre at night depressing enough, and his girlfriend Gloria, her family's swimming pool when it was drained in the winter, but the sight of the big red-brick library with its dark windows affected him even more deeply, in the same way that the sight of a derelict school might affect a teacher, or an empty restaurant a chef: a clear sign of the impending collapse of civilisation and the inevitable bankruptcy, a reminder never to count your chickens, or to overspend on refurbishments and cutlery. No one likes to see a shut library.

But for Israel Armstrong the sight of this shut library was more than just an omen or a mere unpleasantness. For Israel, this was personal. For chubby little Israel Armstrong, in his brown corduroy suit and his best brown shoes, all the way over from England, first time in Ireland and first time in the north, the sight of this particular shut library was an absolute disaster. This was unmitigated. For Israel, far from home and in a country not his own, this was the punch that comes out of nowhere and sends you heading for the canvas. For Israel, this particular shut library meant that he was out of a job. It also meant, as the cold December winds lashed around his legs and blew up litter all around him, that he had absolutely

no idea where he was going to spend the night.

He hadn't exactly expected a welcoming committee. He hadn't expected the whole country, or even the whole of the north of the country, or the whole of County Antrim even to turn out with flags and banners, he hadn't expected an all-Ireland green and orange, Guinness-sponsored celebration, but some kind of acknowledgement of his arrival would have been nice, some recognition that finally he was here, that the new Tumdrum and District librarian had arrived. But no. There was no sign of interest or excitement in Israel's presence in the town of Tumdrum in the county of Antrim late on that cold December afternoon. He had arrived and no one cared.

So. He did the only thing he could do under the circumstances. In the face of rejection he attempted to maintain his dignity and his pride. He turned his back on them, the whole lot of them – on the library, on the dog, on the faceless, faithless people of the north of the north of Ireland – he turned his back on the big empty building, picked up his suitcase, pulled his big flapping duffle coat tighter around him, his pockets bulging neurotically with emergency paperbacks and newspapers, just in case he was ever caught short without something to read, and he sighed a sigh, and prodded his glasses boldly back, and stepped forward. And into the huge, hot, curling turd left behind by the fat, half-blind, arthritic *Irish* dog. Israel groaned and he cursed and he limped over to a muddy patch of grass near the library entrance and wiped his soles.

That was just his luck. That was just bloody typical.

He managed to wipe most of it off on the grass, and

used the *Guardian* to scrape off the rest. He shrugged again and trudged down the cracked concrete disabled access ramp and through the empty car park and back down to the road.

This was definitely not supposed to happen. No. This was not it at all.