

## 301 North

301 North Washington Street was the address of the public library where I worked for almost twenty years. And "301 North" was the name I titled the real life drama that played out there like a soap opera everyday. Don't get me wrong, I was as much a part of this soap opera as any of the cast of characters that frequented the library.

Picture the scene. There's a dashing handsome lead librarian sitting at the service desk, and that would be me. Well, perhaps that's a stretch, but humor me anyway as we get to experience a little bit of the drama that was 301 North.

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It's 9 am and the phone rings promptly. The first call of the day is from sweet Mrs. Chambers, a resident at one of the local retirement homes. "My Charley is fussing about seismic activity and predicting a major tsunami off the Northwest Florida coast. Can you tell me dear, have there been any tremors or earthquakes in that area?" she asks. Charley is her canary.

I relay information from the US Geological Survey website; there hasn't been any seismic activity in the region. "Oh," she sighs, sounding quite disappointed. I can hear Charley chirping vociferously in the background, he does sound quite adamant. Ever the helpful librarian, I suggest he might have meant Vanuatu - "because they've just had a big one."

The phone rings again, "If I take I 26 eastbound, what direction am I heading in? And do you know if they still have that *buy one get one free* deal at Kentucky Fried Chicken?"

"Good morning Angelica," and would you like a frosty with that, I think to myself. Of course I wouldn't say it. However, I confirm the ongoing promotions at KFC and help with driving directions, "Eastbound means you're driving away from KFC and headed towards Bojangles."

"OK, thanks, now I know where I am," she replies. I expect she'll be making a U turn.

I'm on a roll. My Masters Degree in Library and Information Science has prepared me very well. So we are off to a good start this morning. *Let's cut to a commercial break now that I have your interest.*

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As we return to the day unfolding the head of maintenance reports to me that he found a bedroll behind the shrubbery in front of the library, by the children's department. Last week a gym bag was found above the ceiling tiles in the men's restroom containing personal care items. Prior to that, a clean set of clothes was found in the local history room. And yesterday a bottle of ketchup was sitting on the shelf in the locked case where we keep the rare books.

No doubt someone is secretly living in our midst; if only we could catch them. Obviously we have to review our nighttime closing procedures.

The phone rings again. The caller tells me that in the 1950s his grandfather used to work at Connemara, the rural estate of Pulitzer prizewinning poet Carl Sandburg in nearby Flat Rock. It so happens one day he noticed Mr. Sandburg shave his beard off. Rather cunningly his grandfather swept up the whiskers and placed them safely in a box. Now that his grandson was the beneficiary of this hairy investment, could I please tell him how much Carl Sandburg's beard in a box is worth?

I've never actually seen a picture of Carl Sandburg sporting a beard. May be my Masters Degree in Library and Information Science didn't prepare me very well after all. *There will be a brief intermission of 301 North while I collect my thoughts and figure out how to tackle this one. Normal programming will resume shortly.*

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Later that morning I find myself berated by Mrs. Bumgartner for not knowing the topic of the Women's Lunchtime Lecture Series at the First United Methodist church on Tuesday at noon. So now my masters degree really is not worth its salt.

"I'm sure Tony would know," she sniffs, "After all..."

Please don't say it, please don't say it, I think to myself,

She gives me a look of disdain. "After all Tony is the library!" she quips and turns to leave.

Aw, she said it, and it's true, no one can quite match the customer service standards of Tony. This year's award for the most outstanding in public service goes to Tony, as it does every year. And it will go to him posthumously for a decade or so. Yes, he's that good.

I really could do with a boost to my self esteem right now. And then I see it, the feather duster, its plumage traveling along the top of the nonfiction shelves, like a rogue neon pink chicken. Here comes Krystal the cleaning lady.

Armed with a spray bottle full of cleanser she fires indiscriminately at any and every surface. She's the sharpest shooting cleaning lady in the west, eradicating dust bunnies with aplomb.

She comes to the desk with her flip phone and takes a call from her "agent". She tells the staff, that cleaning is something she does on the side and that she's really a swim suit model. Her imaginary phone call is with her imaginary agent telling her she has a photoshoot scheduled in Miami this weekend. She tells me a driver will come and pick her up and take her to the airport after work. "That's great," I reply. I like her a lot.

For a moment or two I'm with her in her imaginary world, on location with her surf boys. "I don't know Krystal last week Bondi Beach this week Miami Beach. Must be nice," I say.

"Honey, the pay is great. They pay me so much more than the county does for cleaning." She squirts another random shot of cleanser and shows me a picture of a kangaroo on her phone, a picture she took while in Australia last week. And another of her supposedly zip lining in Costa Rica.

Krystal makes the day more colorful, and I forget all about being berated by Miss Bumgartner.

*This portion of 301 North brought to you today by Krystal. Krystal cleans 60% brighter than other cleaning ladies. Let Krystal brighten your day!*

It's probably time to review the events calendar, forewarned is forearmed, as they say. There's always something scheduled for the library's auditorium. Everything from the local chapter of the North American Chrysanthemum Society "oohing and aahing" over the latest hybrid, to survivalists with prepping tips for the next cataclysmic event. And of course my favorites, the Lost Playwrights of Western North Carolina, who in spite of their name can be reliably found every 3rd Saturday of the month in the library auditorium.

Let's see today at 2:00 pm Mazilka the belly dancer will be performing at the main library. It says here that, not only will she be dancing to authentic middle eastern music, she will be simultaneously balancing a sword on her head. No doubt to the delight of a minivan of seniors being specially bussed in for the performance.

And then at 4:00 pm a local herpetologist will be arriving with a truck load of snakes including the star of the show, Dolly, a 12 Ft. reticulated python. The event is part of the Children's Summer Reading Program. This year's theme, "Jaws and Claws Behind Library Doors." Really, who comes up with these themes?

I do hope Mazilka finishes dancing before Dolly python takes to the stage. There have been occasions where one group refuses to leave the auditorium at their designated time, resulting in an all out melee. It happens.

Hmm, can you imagine if dancing Mazilka ends up sharing the stage with a python? The performance will go from culturally enlightening to erotically titillating, from arabesque to burlesque, a little less Washington Street and a lot more Vegas Strip - and I fear not in keeping with the values of the library mission statement.

Since there's currently a lull in phone calls and walk in requests now would be a good time to reminisce about some of our more notable episodes here at 301 North.

## **911 what is your emergency?**

Every season has its share of medical emergencies. One morning I notice there's an elderly lady sitting on the bench just before you exit to the lobby. I say sitting, but slouched would be more accurate. I think nothing of it as I pass by the first time. Then some thirty minutes later I pass by her again, and she does not appear to have moved. Then perhaps another half hour or more passes and I have reason to go her way to retrieve a biography. Still she has not moved, and no one seems to be with her. Now my concern is growing. Is she in fact conscious?

I approach her along with a coworker. There is enough hustle and bustle in the vicinity that she should at least twitch now and then. But there's not the slightest movement. With her heavy coat it's hard to see if she is even breathing.

"Ma'am, are you OK?" I ask, but there's still no response. Even a firm tap on the shoulder doesn't elicit a reaction. She is in a completely unresponsive stupor. Thoughts begin to race and I assume the worse. Time to dial 911. No one can die on my watch.

So EMS is called – both an ambulance and fire engine are dispatched. They arrive in the parking lot, sirens wailing, and an assembly of first responders quickly fill the lobby.

While they are tending to her a man appears, apparently returning from the restroom, and wants to know why everyone is fussing around his wife.

It turns out that she had been participating in a sleep study all night at the local hospital, and she was merely sleep deprived and not actually catatonic. "She's just a little tired," the husband insists. And where on earth have you been for the last two hours I ask myself?

"No need to worry," her husband placates everyone. The lady's eyes are slightly open now, but she still remains silent, offering no explanation of her own.

The attending medic removes the stethoscope from his ears to catch the drift of the conversation. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief, even the deflating blood pressure cuff lets out a little sigh.

Well, apparently she's fine. On the other hand, now with all eyes on me, the dashing handsome lead librarian, well, I'm sure I look a bit flushed.

"It's better to be safe than sorry isn't it?" I say to everyone gathered around the drowsy old lady. I'm trying to convince myself of that by saying so and to justify the presence of medics and firemen as they pack up to leave.

I dread writing up the requisite incident report, so the county's risk management officer will be aware we'd called 911, again. Reason for calling 911, this time because someone was taking a nap.

It's only been a week since the fire department answered our last call for help. On that occasion someone had deliberately set fire to the paper towel dispenser in the men's restroom. The fire alarm sounded, an all out assault on ones ears. We executed our emergency procedures quite masterfully getting all the patrons outside quickly and assembling at a safe distance in the church parking lot across the road.

However, we had only successfully gotten the patrons out that were in when the emergency began. Now there was a steady stream of new patrons arriving. Apparently undeterred by the sight of a big red fire engine and the sound of the fire alarm they were still entering a burning building, bumping into firemen and climbing over fire hoses.

So desperate to pickup the latest John Grisham book before their 3 day hold on it expired; never mind the fact they might themselves expire of smoke inhalation before they get to the checkout counter.

### **Listen when the universe is trying to tell you something**

Meryl was a frequent user of the library's computer workstations, although she struggled to master the point and click of the mouse. Between angry tuts and gasps of exasperation she sat for a frustrated hour or two trying to book her dream vacation to Mexico on the internet.

I can't help but think the universe is trying to tell her something as she accidentally closes off her session for the third time. But she insists on trying again. I log her back onto the computer and give her a few tips. After a few more curses and a flourish of aggressive keyboarding, against all odds, she apparently triumphs and her vacation is scheduled.

A month or so later the evening news reports that a local woman has tragically drowned while swimming on vacation along the Mexican Riviera. It was Meryl.

She was swept away by a merciless wave into the Pacific Ocean. Any sounds of her distress muffled by the music of the mariachi band playing at the beachfront resort where she'd been staying. I imagine her seeing the bright lights of the seaside fiesta fading into the distance as her legs cramp and she sinks into the blue. The universe sighs and waves its finger in admonishment. It tried to warn her.

I look across the room and see computer workstation number 3, the one she used to book that vacation. It sits silent and vacant, uncaring about its complicity in all of this. Perhaps I'll avoid using that one for a while.

## **Hearing voices part 1**

I was never very good at physics and Mrs. Clamp my secondary school physics teacher would attest to that. Armed with that knowledge the laws of physics, aided and abetted by my lack of self-confidence at times, will often play tricks on me.

The auditorium was filled to capacity with an audience eager to hear from perennial favorite, Bob, an accomplished photographer for an iconic magazine, reliving his glory days in the 1950s when he may have or have not dated some Hollywood starlets he now idolizes in his video montage presentations. Only the wireless microphone was acting up. I was summoned to assist, as is the case with any technology related issue.

After fiddling with it for a minute I make my assessment of the situation. I think I will either replace the batteries or swap it out for the other one. "Hang on Bob while I go get the spare," I say reassuringly.

I left the auditorium and returned to the work room, to either look for batteries, or another wireless mic'. And at some point unbeknownst to me the previously uncooperative wireless mic' in my hand begins to function; and everything I'm muttering in the privacy of the workroom is being very publicly broadcast through two ginormous Bose speakers in the auditorium, which I reiterate was filled to capacity.

"God they must think I'm so lame," yes, I think that's what I said as I fiddled with the equipment and that's what everyone sitting out there undoubtedly heard, with the "concert quality clarity" promised by the Bose salesman.

Forewarned by a coworker on what had just transpired, I begin to wonder what else I might have said. Ok, now so I have to go back in the auditorium and face them all. Take a deep breath. I can do this. Tomorrow is Sunday and I can stay at home and hide from the world all day with my dogs. My dogs, who love me regardless of my mishaps and blunders.

## **Hearing voices part 2**

It was nighttime, 9 pm. I had just taken the money up to the bookkeeper's office and deposited it in the safe. I returned to the main floor ready to do the final walk through before leaving when suddenly a loud voice bellowed, "Back up! Back up! "

I was startled to say the least. Rather than backing up, I remained still, standing between two rows of nonfiction shelving waiting for another gruff order. I'm thinking please don't ask me to open the safe again. I can barely do it under the best of circumstances, under duress would simply be impossible. "That's it. Stop right there," the gruff voice continues.

I felt quite scared, my heart racing. Then I heard the crackling sound of static, and a beeping, the kind you hear when a large delivery truck is in reverse. I was momentarily confused and somewhat disoriented. And then the sound of loud engines rumbled. What the devil is going on?

Suddenly I realized all these sounds were being broadcast over the library intercom. Through the magic of radio frequencies and the implausible, at least to me, laws of physics, our library sound system was channeling or transmitting the communications of the night crew paving the road outside.

Sure enough, on leaving the building all is revealed. Heavy equipment is scraping the surface of 3rd Avenue, preparing it for new blacktop.

Reassured that I wasn't hearing voices I manage to remain sane for now, but we all know it's just a matter of time, as every good soap has a breakdown or two.

## **Crime Scene 301**

In spite of the safe and bucolic image the library manages to perpetuate our little corner of 3rd Avenue and Washington Street still seemed to be an epicenter for crime in Hooterville.

We had our petty criminals who would steal tablets and other gadgets from unsuspecting patrons in the library, and then try to sell them at the door to incoming patrons. But, we also had our more sophisticated high tech hackers involved in cybercrime. In those instances the internet police in Raleigh would call and tell us that someone was using an inordinate amount of bandwidth on the library wifi and must



be conducting nefarious business – like pirating movies or music. And so they'd pull the plug on our access, albeit temporarily; leaving us to manage the meltdown and withdrawal symptoms of 30 Internet dependent patrons cut off from their supply.

The FBI paid a visit once. Apparently the Centennial Olympic Park bomber Eric Rudolph, who was in hiding, was thought to be in the vicinity. A year or so later he was arrested in a neighboring county. Following the arrest his brother came in the library. His brother, who in protest of the arrest, cut off his own hand with a circular saw.

I remember trying to hand him a printout expecting him to grasp it. But his reattached hand didn't work any more. It was all scarred and gnarled and I remember just having to balance the pages on it, rather unsuccessfully – the pages just fell onto the desk, scattering every which way. Awkward!

But nothing prepares you for the following episode.

### **Who can you trust anymore?**

The library has a policy that requires users of the computer workstations to have a library card. If you were not in possession of one, then a picture ID with home address was necessary.

The lady in front of me, her only ID was her woefully expired season pass to Sea world, in Florida. She presents it unabashedly. She must be used to the drill by now, in a world where you're only as valid as your ID. She's quietly defiant or innocently optimistic. She holds onto a sticky sucker, like a small child. It's as if Sea World was her country of origin and this crumpled card her passport. Works for me. I assign her a computer.

Though she's not quite what she seems. She talks with a whisper, underneath she conceals a man's voice, the man she was born and disavowed a long time ago.

I imagine her backstory; as John she enters Sea World one morning and stays after closing. She spends the nights swimming with beluga whales and mysterious narwhals until one day she magically reemerges from the exhibit pool on a giant scallop shell, like Botticelli's Venus, reborn and renamed as Kissimmee St. John. (The original John martyred in the process) Before leaving sea world, she steals a lifetime supply of cherry flavored suckers from a concession stand. Now She's staying at the homeless shelter on 7th Avenue and is a regular visitor to the library.

On this particular day Kissimmee comes in with a drifter, known on the streets as Arkansas, their arms linked like lovers. He looks dangerous. His face is a mug shot waiting to happen. I fear for her safety. She giggles and tries to show him how to use a computer. I hear her whispering, but he's not interested, he says, "Fuck this," and leaves.

At some point later in the week the unthinkable crime is committed. A kindhearted stranger who listens to Puccini and makes his own pasta, offers Arkansas a home cooked meal, only to be strangled by him, his hands and feet bound with cables and cords and left dead in a closet. Arkansas steals his car.

Kissimmee came to the library the day after news broke. Visibly shaken, "Who can you trust anymore," she whispers. She clutches a romance paperback against her flat chest and places her sticky sucker back in her mouth, like a pacifier. A salty Sea World tear in her swollen red eyes.

"I know it's terrible, take care of yourself," I say. Really, What else could you say?

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The grim shadows cast by such violent acts temporarily darken the colorful world of cheery book jackets here at 301 North. The horror mutes the children singing rhymes in story time and silences the lilting exchange of pleasantries at the front desk.

But eventually the light in these activities will again dispel the darkness. It always does, because 301 North will prevail. (Cue some very heartfelt rousing music) The library is resilient and it will forever continue to shape the lives of its mountain community, as it has done so since 1914.

It's true The common place and the routine, the safely predictable and the sheer weight of normalcy together bury the skeletons of unpleasant things; the man who comes to read the New York Times daily, the fussy old lady who says, "Thanks a million," but doesn't mean it, and the ardent fan of anything and everything Judi Dench has starred in. For that we can be thankful.

Oops, that got a bit heavy. So let's end the review on a lighter note.

## Holiday Special

Before you know it the Christmas tree goes up in the lobby. The hand bell ringers arrive, a holiday favorite of library patrons, with standing room only in the auditorium. People drop off food donations for the local food bank, and fresh baked brownies for the staff. Kindness and generosity prevails. The Snow falls deep enough that we even get a delayed opening. Good holiday vibrations reverberate throughout the library with tidings of comfort and joy. Ah yes, every good soap opera has its holiday special with some feel good moments. And so another year ends in the lives of those whose appetites are filled at 301 North.

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*And now we return to our normally scheduled programming already in session. It's currently 4:00 pm.*

You will be pleased to know that Mazilka has left the building with time to spare, sword in hand, and more importantly, head still attached. Now, with their horizons widened and appetites primed, the seniors bribe the minivan driver to swing by Sinbad's for a helping of baba ganoush before returning them to the nursing home, for Thursday night's fare, of southern fried something.

And with barely enough room, Dolly python is proudly stretched out across the full width of the auditorium stage, eagerly held by 11 brave participants in this year's Children's Summer Reading Program. And fortunately all 11 survive. I dare say Dolly will probably get a nice juicy rat for her supper for being on her best behavior.

The library has delivered on its promise of programming to suit all ages and tastes. And my impressive reference question tally justifies my existence. It's almost time for me to call it a day. All that remains is for my relief to come to the desk.

And here he comes now, it's Steve or should I say, "*Steep?*" *Steep Ravine* is the name I gave to my coworker Steve because he rides a motorcycle to work and on the weekends goes off-road on dirt tracks.

I imagine he undertakes death-defying stunts, his motorcycle flying through the air from one granite outcrop to the next, over treacherous canyons, always modeling the latest in outdoor wear – and rocking the craziest receding hairline, kind of like a Mohawk wannabe. Every soap needs its action hero, and 301 North has *Steep Ravine*.

Eager to tell a funny story, Steep shares a reference question he got over the weekend.

"So what the guy meant to say was – what's the minimum legal age for *emancipation* in Tennessee," Steep pauses,

"But, what he actually said was – what's the minimum legal age for *masturbation* in Tennessee? "

And so we all have a chuckle at the patron's expense.

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Unfortunately for 301 North fans, contract negotiations fell through after season 17, and so 301 North was not renewed. Actually, I think I suffered from what was recently recognized by World Health Organization as a bona fide medical condition – *burnout*. One of its symptoms being increased mental distance from one's job.

I did a little research, I am a reference librarian after all, and learned that I could actually buy 3 years of service because of my prior library work in South Carolina. I could then add this to my 17 years of North Carolina service and retire with 20 years. This would provide me with a little retirement income. So what was I waiting for? Send me "those" papers and I'll sign them immediately!

I'm ready to leave this act and become myself.