

Statement of Emile Harris, regarding an accidentally returned book to the Southwark Public Library.

17th Dec. 2019

I work as a library clerk- it's not the most exciting job, but it pays well and I enjoy it. I spend most of my time checking books in, organizing them, and returning them to their assigned shelves. Or gathering orders for people who put them in online. But mostly the former- I like keeping things organized, and I know where every book belongs.

It's a busy time of year for the library. Term is ending for secondary school and the universities, so our tables are almost always filled, and our reference book section looks like a deserted wasteland. For some of the more popular subjects, our waitlist queue is literally weeks long, and we shorten the return time to five days. It's a quick turnaround, and most of my time is spent picking through the return bins for books to toss right back out onto reserve shelves, or hand to aggravated students who 'saw we had it in stock, why isn't it on the shelf?'

Another part of my job consists of calling and sending email notifications for overdue books. The generic messages tend to get ignored, but when a young man calls your phone and politely asks that you return your overdue copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, it usually gets results. So, once the library closes, I usually settle in at the front desk with a list and get a couple of extra hours in sending emails and making phone calls.

I was in the middle of making those phone calls when I heard a banging on the library door. Now, it's a busy time of year, but not usually 'come pound on the door at 10:30' busy. So I was understandably perturbed, and grabbed the office phone, in case I'd have to phone for help.

But the pounding turned out to be a kid- maybe in his late teens or early twenties? Definitely a university student, at least. And he was carrying armfuls of books.

Now, we have a book return slot for a reason- people can drop their books off at anytime, and someone like me will round them up, scan them in, and replace them. There's no need to be knocking on the door hard enough to shake the glass an hour after the library closes. I tried to articulate that to the kid through the glass, but he didn't seem to understand.

After a couple of minutes, I resigned myself to the paperwork of filling out an incident report, and opened the door, letting him in. The kid barely said a word, just dropped all of the books on the desk and hurried back out, thanking me for my time.

I tried to stop him- to ask who he was or why he didn't return them the usual way- but he didn't even spare me a second glance, essentially *running* out of the library. Like he thought I was going to chase him out for his late fees or something.

We don't even *do* late fees anymore. I really don't understand what his avoidance was all about.

But now I had a pile of unchecked books to get a handle on, so I abandoned my task of phone calls and emails, and set about checking them all in. They were mostly reference books on architecture, probably some sort of final research project. And some of them weren't even overdue- certainly nothing worthy of his urgency.

It was the last two books in the stack that caught my eye. One of them wasn't a library book- now, this isn't uncommon. We get books accidentally turned in all the time. Usually we just call the person and they pick it up, or decide they don't want the book anyhow and we put it in a bin for our community book drives.

It looked like some sort of old fiction book by the cover- leather bound, with fancy gold lettering that read *The Wall at the Top of the Stair*. Not something I'd ever heard of, but I'm a library clerk. It's not as if I've read every book.

The other book was one of ours. A book of MC Escher paintings, with analysis essays. Nothing unusual from the surface, but when I flipped through for bookmarks, I had to stop. Every single painting was defaced. All of them.

There were doors drawn on the walls, and staircases added in places that were odd, even for Escher works. Very clearly drawn with erratic penstrokes. Like someone had scribbled them on in some sort of mad dash.

But when I touched the pages, they were perfectly smooth. Now, I've dealt with defaced books before- it happens every once in a while, someone will tear through a book they don't like or they don't agree with, and we have to order a new copy. Penstrokes that thick and harsh always leave a mark- sometimes they even go through to other pages. But the paper was perfectly unmarred- as if the penstrokes were printed in.

I checked the book again- making sure it was a real MC Escher book and not some sort of parody collection. But no, it was a simple reference book on Escher's paintings. Feeling a headache coming on, I googled a couple of the paintings- maybe I'd remembered them wrong, and those doors and staircases *were* a part of the image.

But no- I had the page open in my lap, and the image open on the computer screen, and it was clear that one of them was terribly wrong. My fingers kept tracing the added lines, hoping to feel something, to notice some difference. Page after page, painting after painting, I checked every single added line, but to no avail.

The book just seemed to be entirely misprinted, with garish additions to every single painting.

And the doors seemed to be getting more warped the longer I looked at them. It had to be a trick of the light, or something with how tired my eyes were getting. But I swore the doors seemed to be shifting and tilting every time I moved the pages.

With what seemed like more effort than should have been necessary, I closed the book and set it aside with the little leather one. I couldn't in good faith return a book like that to the shelves, but I wasn't high enough up on the food chain to declare a book beyond repair. So I figured I'd leave it for tomorrow, when another librarian was in and could pass judgement.

I sent an email to all of my coworkers, logged out, grabbed *The Wall at the Top of the Stair*, and left.

Now, I say I grabbed the book- I don't *remember* grabbing it. But when I got home, it was in my bookbag along with my laptop. So I must have picked it up on accident when I was cleaning away my things.

Settling down for the night, I decided to give the book another skim through- if it was an interesting read, maybe I'd get through it myself before putting it in the bin. And if not, at least I'd have an opinion to give to anyone who asked.

It wasn't a bad book, by any means. Some sort of turn of the century locked room mystery- it was actually pretty good in terms of suspense. But I couldn't shake something, the entire time I was reading it.

The door that the book kept describing in such great detail sounded familiar. By the third or fourth description, I found myself sketching it out on a notepad by my desk. And it wasn't just any door- the door I was drawing looked exactly like my own.

Sure I had to have misread something, or misinterpreted, I went back to the first description, checking details against my drawing. Everything seemed right. A brown door with off-white detailing and a brass knob, old and a little tarnished. A peep hole at just above eye height, somewhere you'd need to get on your toes to look out. Even the bit of cracking around the frame was described.

Setting the book and the notebook down, I grabbed my phone and headed out to the hallway of my apartment complex, staring at the door to my flat. There was no question about it- that was the exact door the book was describing. But there was no way it could have been- the book was written in the 1890s, and even if my flat was a little out of date, the oldest it could have been was the early 80s.

No way any author could have known what my door looked like and used it as some sort of reference.

More than a little unnerved, I opened the book back up, reading and hoping to get to another description of the door, where they revealed some drastically different detail, something that made it not mine.

Distantly, I was aware of footsteps in the hallway. It was a little late for my neighbors to be getting home, but I ignored it. Until I couldn't ignore it anymore.

The footsteps were getting closer- right outside the door. And my flat was at the end of the hall- no reason for anyone to be walking past it. Sitting still on my couch, I listened, eyes trained on the book as if looking toward my closed door would alert the person outside of it.

When the footsteps stopped and didn't continue, I waited- long enough to convince myself I'd been hearing things- and started to read again. I was almost to the end of the book. Surely, something at the end would change this, would make it all seem normal. Just an average mystery.

I turned to the last page and read the line on it just as the scraping started- barely audible, but there on the edge of my awareness.

*You'll need to find a different door. That door is ours now.*

Chilled, I closed the book and set it aside. I would have to hand it to the author, the atmosphere really had me going. But then the scraping sounded again, like nails against paint, and the doorknob clicked, catching on the lock.

I watched the door all night. Every now and then, it would click or the scraping would sound, or the footsteps would pick up again. Just as I thought the sounds were finished and I could relax, just as I was starting to drift back to sleep, they would start again and the fear would send my heart racing.

Was there some sort of GPS chip in the book? Had someone tracked me home? Was this some sort of weird targeted serial killer?

The theories raced in my mind, and all the while, I didn't notice what my hands were doing.

On every surface, every piece of paper they could reach, I was drawing doors. Messy, slanted, terrible doors. Sorry, by the way. I hope you can still read this. I can't stop drawing them.

I have to find one that works. I have to find one that catches their eye. I need my door back. I need to be safe again.

Statement Ends

Emile Harris quit his job at the Southwark Public Library after several days of missing work, apparently refusing to open his door. We received his statement via letter, covered in drawings of doors of all shapes and sizes. By all accounts, Mister Harris is still renting his flat in Southwark, though we have received no further information on this case.

Along with his letter, Emile included several extremely detailed drawings of what I can only assume is his own door, with long fingered hands clutching at the knob and scratching the paint off in streaks.