

The Parable of *The Goldfinch*

The 5th-floor library Help Desk sits a lifeboat in a sea of the floor-to-ceiling construction-hiding tarps. The floor-to-ceiling construction-hiding tarps are clear and, as such, do not hide much construction. They do, however, give a sterile-ish hospital effect, or perhaps someone's neighbor's homemade haunted house kind of vibe. All of this is annoying. All of this is not nearly as annoying as the covering of the bookshelves. The bookshelves are covered by repurposed floor-to-ceiling bad-at-hiding-construction tarps. Bloody red duct tape affixes these tarps to one another and to the bookshelves themselves, adding to the hospital/homemade haunted house thing we've got going on.

Captaining the ship as a humanities reference assistant student-lead (a position that comes with a highly coveted one dollar an hour raise) I have three official responsibilities: one, tell people where the bathroom is (it's right behind you), two, tell people how long the construction will last (I don't know), three, help people find books. The third responsibility is the problematic one, as bookshelves (or *stacks* in library speak) are currently covered in sterile clear tarps. We used to be able to cut through the tarps and surgically tape them back together, but we've since been instructed to try and rip off the red tape and roll the giant tarps back to slip under them and pull the books off the shelves. It's a terrible process: it's tedious, it messes up my hair, and I look really lame doing it.

Which I guess is the point in which I should mention my fourth, *unofficial* responsibility at the library: be cool. Now, nobody will tell you this. It is not in any training or guidebook, but it is, perhaps, the most important aspect of the job. See, most freshmen start college with the opinion that libraries are decidedly *not* cool. Half the battle of working at a library is getting people to show up in the first place. That's why we run scavenger hunts and force first-year-writing students to bring their papers to the writing center. That's why the library is in the middle of campus and has couches and board games on the ground floor, 3D printers, and even a restaurant now. That's why the reference assistants have to be cool. Because if the *reference* assistants are cool, then the *library* is cool, and if the *library* is cool, then people come to the library, and the library gets more funding to buy more books and completely remodel, say, the

fifth floor, for example. Which brings me to my current dilemma: those bookshelf-covering, hair-messing-upping, bad-at-hiding-construction tarps.

Picture this, I'm sitting at the helpdesk on a Thursday afternoon. It's four p.m.-ish, maybe five. I've been on campus since nine a.m., and won't leave campus until nine p.m. I'm chatting with my coworker, postulating on the bagel I want to eat when I finally make it out of here, when I'm approached by a patron; Patron is a nice word we use to describe people who come to the library (Patron can also mean a person who gives large donations to support your business, but he wasn't that kind of patron, he was just a student who had the misfortune of still being on campus at four or five p.m. in June.) He looks at me expectantly (patrons do that sometimes, as if waiting for you to read their mind) before he asks the dreaded question: "Can you help me find a book?"

Patron's usually add, "the book is supposed to be over there, but it's covered by a tarp," as if I haven't yet noticed the tarps covering 90% of the fifth floor.

I ask him what book he was looking for and he answers: "*The Goldfinch*, by Donna Tart."

Damn.

The Goldfinch is literary fiction, a Pulitzer-prize winner, a bona-fide *cool* novel. The kind of book you carry around in a reusable tote bag and read sipping Macha at an outdoor café or on public transport so that other environmentally conscious liberals can note your sophisticated taste in literature. *The Goldfinch* is cool like *The Bell Jar* is cool, or *Franz Kafka* is cool, or *Elena Ferrante* is cool, nothing like the plebian paper-back fantasy novels I carry around in my reusable tote bag. Which means this isn't just a patron, this is a *cool* patron, and the pleasure to please him is on. I jump from my chair (I'm five feet tall and the desk chair has a couple inches on me, so I sit with my feet kicking back and forth like a baby in a highchair, decidedly *not* cool) and grab the giant roll of red duct tape to lead him back into the stacks.

"So what are you studying?" I ask.

No reply. *Damn.*

“This construction is crazy,” I try again. They always want to talk about the construction; they can’t resist. If there’s one thing people can always find common ground on, it’s complaining, and if there’s one thing people love to complain about, excepting the price of groceries or the price of gas or the price of rent, it’s construction.

I’ve wagered my bets right, because he responds, “how long will it last?”

“Uhhh,” *damn*, “I don’t know.”

We walk the rest of the way in silence.

His precious *Goldfinch* is in the middle of the shelf—the middle, and the top. The average person can reach the top shelf with relatively little difficulty. I, un-averagely, cannot. If that wasn’t bad enough, the book being in the middle of a shelf means that it’s in the *middle* of a tarp: red duct tape on one side, red duct tape on another side, red duct tape on the top of the shelf, and red duct tape on the bottom of the shelf. I brace myself and get to tearing.

Rrrrrrrrip. The duct tape comes off one side. I pull with all the desperation of someone who hasn’t seen her apartment in nine hours. *Rrrrrrrrip.* I am a mad woman. Red duct tape goes flying. It’s bloody: grotesque. Finally, I have freed enough tarp to allow me to slip beneath it. Cool Patron holds it back as I wedge myself between plastic and shelf. My hair sticks to the plastic, static pulling strands upward and away from my head like a beached mermaid. Squashed, my hand reaches upwards, toes tiptoeing, and I brush—I brush the soft, pink, pads of my fingers against the spine of *The Goldfinch* and—

I’m too short.

“Uhh,” there’s a voice, garbled by plastic, “do you need help?”

I do. I am defeated. Thoroughly humiliated, I wiggle my way back out. I serve penance holding the tarp back so Cool Patron can wedge himself between plastic and shelf and grab *The Goldfinch*, which

he does with incredible nonchalance. He thanks me, but I can see the pity in his eyes: He does not think I am cool. He does not think the library is cool. If the Help Desk is a ship, and I am the captain, I have crashed it into an iceberg. He will tell this story dramatically tonight and his roommates will laugh, likely cool themselves, and rest easy in their own superiority of vibe and resolution not the use the dangerously lame library.

So there's a sort of quiet reverence with which I tape the bookshelf-covering tarp back down, mind whirling with my own failure, but, when I lean out to see the results of my work, I laugh. I've done a bad job: The tarp is askew and crumpled and still boasts a couple of my hairs slicked to the surface—It looks terrible. We are not cool, neither I nor the floor-to-ceiling, hair-messing-upping, bloody-red-duct-taped, bad-at-hiding-construction-tarp, but we have both done our jobs. There's a sort of kinship between the tarp and me. We are both messy and frustrated and frumpled, but we do the best we can.