

The Fascination of Laura Clarke

By Bill Clunie

Part 2

But we're in the back room at the bookstore, a relatively unimportant place, dealing as it does in books, which depend as we know on the increasingly irrelevant medium of the printed word. I have just taken the trash out, an object lesson in how irrelevant the printed word is. My trash load consisted of eight boxes of stripped books which I dumped in the compactor in the underbelly of this glass-and-steel Northeast Portland shopping mall. Eight boxes of books, their covers stripped off and sent back to the publishers for credit. Eight boxes, each containing some two hundred paperbacks, most of them garbage in content as well as in fact, to be sure, romances and westerns and mysteries and elf sagas, predictable, formulaic stories, the worst of the worst, so slovenly written for the most part they don't even meet the depressed standards of category fiction. But some of these books are good books. Good books get thrown away. It happens. We over-order here at J. Johnson Booksellers. We get more books than we can sell. It's just the way of the corporate world. Better to have too much than not enough, better to drive those sales. The book can always be stripped out, only its cover returned so everybody saves on freight; the publisher gives the corporation full credit -- this is, after all the largest bookstore chain in the country, and what publisher is going to piss off the single largest outlet for its wares? We throw out some fifty cubic feet of books per week. This is not an atypical store, nor is that an atypical figure. Multiply fifty cubic feet by the number of stores in the chain and you come up with better than 50,000 cubic feet of books thrown away weekly by J. Johnson Booksellers. Continue multiplying -- go ahead. I arrive at 2.4 million cubic feet of books tossed out every year by this corporation. How many trees died for these lonesome tomes? That stultifying question remains lodged in my head as I sit in the back room eating my lunch, a cheese sandwich, and listening without wanting to listen to Laura and Yern. They understand the relative unimportance of books. They're not talking books at all, they're talking P-and-L, and grosses and nets, and plans and budgets. I will try to describe them here. I'm hoping if I can describe Laura Clarke with her clothes on I can keep away from that unsatisfactory and admittedly somewhat adolescent reason why I ever, ever, for God's sake, got involved with the woman.

Yern first. Whoop. Respite. Earlier we noted Yern's permanent residence in the 1970s. His hair is feathered and blown back. His collars are too big. He's a wide, slope-shouldered, bodybuilder-used car salesman type with a husky voice always on the verge of cracking, a voice that sounds as though it's been permanently altered by excess steroid use. He's talking in a language I don't know. I really can't do it justice here in the back room of J. Johnson's because it's in a language I really don't know. It's puffed out with acronyms and pet phrases like PMA and Romancing the Product, and it is this last one that clues me in, finally, because I know that's what he's doing as he skins back his lips and points his pearly whites in Laura's direction. He's Romancing his Product right here in the back room, and his product is what every salesman's product ultimately is, nothing but himself, the snake, this married man, hitting on the woman I've been involved with for at least a few weeks now, with no more concern for my presence than if I had been a speck of flyshit.

I must admit it annoyed me, Yern flirting with Laura right in front of me. I don't really like admitting though on what level it did annoy me, a very primal and masculine level. That's what I'm living in fear about here, that is what makes it so hard to put pen to paper and honestly express my experience, because if I'm honest, if I truthfully tell you what it was that grabbed me about Laura Clarke so far back in the mist of narrative, some ten days ago a lead, what it was that propelled me toward her, then I know I will lose a certain number of you. I know I will be judged.

I hate this. I'd like to end it right here, but I can't. Standard narrative might be suspect these days, but still. There is an aesthetic one ought to observe. One really can't stop things just because it's getting a bit touchy. It's a simple matter of self-respect.

The thing is, I just wish I had never let myself get involved with Laura Clarke. I don't think it would be possible for two people who are more incompatible to have gotten together, much less to have been together for as long as we have, which is at least a week now.

Like the other day I take some trash into the back room and when I come back she asks me why I didn't bring the handtruck with me and I just tell her it's because I didn't bring the handtruck with me. And she says, But we're going to be moving those bargain books off that table and we'll need the handtruck and I say, Yeah, but we won't be moving those bargain books until after the noon crowd clears out, which won't be for another half-hour yet. And she says, Yeah, but we'll just have to go and get the handtruck then and that's so inefficient (one of her favorite words), we could have saved a trip. And I say, Christ, I'll get the handtruck

when we need it, what's the big deal, but the thing is when it comes to Laura I know what the big deal is, I've worked with her for almost two years now, I ought to know. Her priorities are all fucked, that's what the big deal is. Really. She's completely focused on saving time on nitty little things, so focused that the big things get completely away from her. Like her DUI. Did I tell you about her DUI? That's Driving Under the Influence in this state, don't know what it's called where you are, and boy has it been an inefficient experience for Laura Clarke. She caught the attention of the police one night with her sloppy driving, and what was causing that sloppy driving? She was eating a Taco Bell burrito and trying not to get hot sauce on her blouse, causing her to weave between lanes. I've told her a dozen times she shouldn't eat and drive and what has she always said? "I'm a busy person," she's always said, "I have to eat on the run. It's more efficient." Yeah, it's cost her \$2,500 and counting so far, that's how efficient it's been. And her past involvements, three in a row, bam-bam-bam, married men, all of them who together managed to gang-break her heart. The thing is, she's a loon, see, a definite loon, I know that, I could go on and on here for pages and pages, veritable reams, about the strange and screwed-up ways of Laura Clarke, really, I have that much material, but I think you get the drift. I think you know the score on Laura now. And I have to wonder just what, pray tell, you will think of me when I tell you I believe I'm falling in love with her?

But I must describe Laura now, and I find that in my thought of her I can really only think of one thing about her, the reason I wanted to touch her and hold her that night after work some several days ago. Momentous life decisions sometimes hinge on pure animal desires. How frightening that is! I wanted to make love to Laura Clarke because... Dum-de-dum. Because of her breasts, that's all there is to it. She has incredible breasts. There. This is so embarrassing. I mean to say it's not embarrassing that we're attracted to each other sometimes, probably even most of the time, on the basis of overt sexual characteristics, that's a given, but still. My fascination with Laura Clarke's cleavage embarrasses me here because I can now be justly accused of objectifying women. I mean I understand to an extent I suppose the problems feminists have with white male literature that objectifies and degrades women. I mean I understand it I guess as much as a white male can. I guess. I'm qualifying the hell out of all this, I know that. But I'm just saying. I'm just trying to be honest here. And I have to admit that the finger of judgment can be fairly pointed at me because I consider Laura an object of physical desire solely on the basis of her incredible breasts. It was her breasts that made me want to make love to her, and it was her breasts that led me to those other things about her I found I could fall in love with, like her mouth, and her lips, and the way she uses her mouth and her lips. I love her mouth and her lips as well as her breasts now. And the way she strokes herself when I lick her breasts, and the noises she makes when we're making love... See how one thing leads to another? You start by pointing your camera on a gal's tits and the next thing you know you're reducing a human being to set of Matisse curves and a couple orifices. Like I say, it's embarrassing, but still. I cannot deny my reality. But I suppose I could at least apologize for it. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

So I'm in the back room staring at Laura's breasts while trying not to stare at her breasts -- it's a very Zen thing -- and it's tough not to be overt about it, she's wearing such a low-cut top and all, the same top she wore some four or five days ago when, after several drinks at the bar around the corner we came back here because she had forgotten her cellular phone and I had grabbed at her, that night we had gotten involved. She's wearing the low-cut top even though it's winter, and cold in our back room, and she's leaning forward a bit from where she is perched on a low stack of boxes, staring up at Yern. They're egging each other on with their sales talk and I'm sitting here on the other side of the room wolfing my cheese sandwich, shifting my camera eye from Laura to Yern to all the books we have back here, all the extra copies of the titles we carry in quantity, the new Sidney Sheldon, the new Danielle Steele, the Stephen King and the Dean Koontz, the Meeve Binchy and the Rush Limbaugh and the Big New Diet Book and the Big New Investment Book. What a lot of crap. And I think I even say that out loud but I'm not sure. It's not as if Laura or Yern notice me or anything. So I shift to a little hand-held camera and take it out onto the floor, then set up a big camera on runners and push it down the center of the store, bookcase after bookcase on either side of the frame falling to the way as I push on. I think a good song for the soundtrack here would be that Eric Clapton one, "Layla," the piano solo at the end of it anyway, but then a customer waylays me and I can no longer maintain my directorial stance.

He asks me if we carry the new Herman Melville novel.

I tell him I wasn't aware of a new Herman Melville novel.

He tells me he saw it at Food Mart.

I tell him Herman Melville's been dead for at least a century.

He looks at me like I'm crazy.

I suggest the possibility that he's thinking of a different author.

He says, Like who?

I tell him he'll have to give me something more to work with before I could hazard a guess, something more than "Two words, sounds like Herman Melville."

He says, they're suspense-thriller kinds of books, really popular.

"Nelson DeMille?" I guess. Bingo. His eyes light up. Buzzers and bells go off. I take him to the book and he follows me to the register and I sell it to him. Immediately behind him in line is a very old woman with a lost expression. "Excuse me," she says. She speaks very slowly. "There's this new book on Alzheimer's Disease... but I can't remember the name of it."

I wait, not quite knowing what to tell her.

"And I can't remember the author," she adds.

I tell her I don't recall seeing a new Alzheimer's book but I take her to the section where it would be if we had it and we talk for a bit but then I have to get back up front. On the way I'm accosted by a customer of truly gargantuan proportions. She is pouring out of the romance section, blocking my path to the front. Her hair is stringy and patches are missing from the top of her head. Tender pink scalp shows through, almost the color of the splotches on her round pie face. "I'm looking for this book," she says. She has a gravelly voice. "I can't find it." I ask her the title. "Cupcake Kisses," she says, "by Janet Smith." I tell her I'll try to order it in for her and scamper my way past her quickly to the front to check the microfiche to see which of our distributors might carry it. She follows me up, other customers bolting to safety at her advance, and when she is maybe ten feet from me she bellows out, "That's Cupcake Kisses, a romance novel." And work continues on like that for awhile, and I'm wondering how long Laura and Yern are going to talk in the back while I handle the front alone. I could always buzz for help but it never does get quite busy enough to demand this measure, and enough time elapses anyway that it is 5:30, time for Laura to leave, and Bryan arrives from the back, her replacement, and I say to him, "Are Laura and Yern still back there?" He nods, and finally Yern comes up and leaves and I am unaccountably relieved, or maybe it is accountable. To lose Laura? To Yern? A death merchant like Yern? and I guess I momentarily forget that Laura is something of the death merchant as well.

Laura finally comes out of the back room about a quarter to six. "Hey," I say. She nods. "Look," I say, getting her off alone momentarily in the Horror section. "You're coming over tonight?" She begs off, automatic excuses of laundry and hair care oozing out of her mouth. My heart pounds as I watch Laura then, a display of Anne Rice novels framing her Medusa hair -- have I told you anything about her Medusa hair? Or her soft blue eyes? She is bundled up, it is winter, did I mention that? When all this is over, will you have a sense of how the weather was? Well it's been cold. It's been cold for a long time. If we had lakes around here they would be frozen, and if you were going to fish in those lakes you would need an ice axe to get at those fishes lurking underneath. That is how the weather has been.

Laura leaves then and I stare at her as she walks out into the mall. It's only been a couple of days, actually. It happened only once, and it happened after we got very drunk. It happened only once but I was hoping more than anything that it would happen again.

Now there's this bar we often go to, those of us who are pals on the staff, and that is most of us, and Laura too, she and I have been close friends for some time here at J. Johnson's Booksellers. Often I go to this bar after work. It's an easy bar to get to. It's right outside the north entrance of the mall, just across the street. Laura and I have often had drinks there. We used to be very good friends, back before we... got involved. The bar has big, plate glass windows and you can sit at the bar and stare into the mirror behind it and watch the passersby out on the street. The bar is called Mr. Lucky's. As I say, Mr. Lucky's is right outside the mall, outside across the street, and Laura and I have been there often in the years we have worked together. I understand it is snowing outside the mall, out there where the bar is and the cars and the telephone poles. That is what a customer tells me. I stand there and watch Laura leave the mall but she does not turn right, she turns left. To the right is the direction of the lot she always parks in. To the left, however, is the way to the mall exit leading to Mr. Lucky's. And that is the way she is heading. In the direction of the bar. Have I made that clear?

I stand behind the register waiting until six o'clock. At six o'clock my replacement arrives and I go in the back and get my coat and scarf and find my gloves. Then I go out into the mall. It is quiet, so quiet now that Christmas is over. The din in here had been incredible scarcely a month ago, but now a little muzak plays, a little night muzak, a bittersweet love song we all know.

I walk quickly through the mall to the mall exit and stand on the street corner across the way from Mr. Lucky's where Laura and Yern sit locked over a drink. In their beginning is our end, that much I know, and I just stand there wondering what to do, make a scene, toss off a tantrum or two? The snow falls out of the dull gray sky onto the dark dull pavement where the cars whiz by.

The snow is the most beautiful thing here, the most beautiful thing I have seen in a long time, at least since that single time I saw the sunshine make an artistic statement on the smooth round form of Laura Clarke as she lay on my bed. But that is a long time ago already. It really is gone, and the snow makes a poor substitute.