**Author’s Note**

Initially with this essay, I struggled with how to incorporate a specific instance which would help accentuate my point about chaos in the library, and that sometimes working in a library is harder than it seems. There were so many choices, but I had a hard time finding one that struck a gentle balance between chaotic and oddly endearing. This was exactly the side of the library I wanted to portray to my readership.

I also wanted to help my readers understand what passion really looks like. For me, it was there the whole time; I have been attending the library since I was a baby and have never ceased to visit it as often as I can. Even when visiting other cities, in my spare time, I frequented the libraries, just to see what they looked like. My first act as a college student was getting a library card at the local public library. Passion is something which a person keeps coming back to, no matter into what kind of situation it has put them. It’s an aching, irresistible desire.

My intended readership for this essay is students who aren’t sure what they’d like to do for the rest of their lives, whether that means those who haven’t decided on a major yet or are questioning their choice.

Bailey Anderson

Supervised Chaos

“Excuse me, Miss, are you a Christian?” He sat in a geometric armchair, looking up from the book he read, *The Bible Code*. With immense front teeth and gray peppered hair with a matching handlebar mustache, he reminded me distinctly of a mouse. He looked as if he had been working outside, covered in a thin film of dried sweat and cigarette ash. The skin around his mouth congregated in folds and creases, laugh lines developing with every grin that stretched across his entire jaw.

Once I had answered his question in the affirmative, that yes, I was a Christian, there was no stopping him as he recounted the contents of his book in a nonsensical flurry of misguided science. “In the book of Revelations, it predicts the end of the world, and I believe we’re in the end-times. When the sun sets tonight, look at its position; it’s not exactly where it should be. The sun is moving toward setting in the east and rising in the west. Science suggests this happens once every 64 million years and causes all life on the planet to end.”

As he finished explaining about the sun and the moon, I was frozen with my arm halfway between my bookcart and the bookshelf in front of me in the middle of reshelving *Friday Night Lights*.

All I could do at this point was nod, as if this made perfect sense. I barely listened, and instead telepathically tried to send a distress signal to my supervisor for the night. I inched my bookcart toward the elevator, but not nearly fast enough.

While my mind was occupied with the distress signal, he continued to explain the science and theology behind his Apocalyptic theory, somehow coming to the conclusion, “And the Earth is moving farther and farther away from the Milky Way.”

“Tell your friends about this, I’m trying to get the word out to as many people as I can so we can all repent and be saved in the kingdom of the Lord.”

I smiled and agreed with him half-heartedly, quietly assuring him that I would tell everyone I knew about the world’s end.

If this happened only once, it wouldn’t have been worth mentioning, because it floats in a choppy sea of craziness which I had encountered at my job at the library. But it hadn’t happened only once. He felt the need to remind me of his theory every time he saw me. He soon became a regular patron, and one every library employee avoided in the most kind-hearted way possible.

When I began searching for a dream career, even from the first time my kindergarten teacher asked what I wanted to be when I “grew up”, I never put a second thought upon the possibility of being a librarian. Even as I took a high school job at the library and fell in love with it, I never saw myself as a cardigan-clad, coffee-guzzling human search engine in a pencil skirt. My job was just that: a job; it wasn’t a career-option.

I bounced between majors for most of high school, each of which I was sure of being the correct one for me until I was presented with another option, much like the bouncing I did between hobbies as a child. Did I want to play piano? What about ballet? Would I fit best into the journalism world? Or maybe I would like to be a substance abuse counselor. What about an elementary school teacher? I felt like a helium balloon floating within the branches of a tree, constantly being passed from one aspiration to the next without much consequence. In the back of my mind, I knew that when I found what I was looking for, I’d have no problem being tethered to it.

It wasn’t until the last month or two of my senior year of high school when I found my tether, and it was there all along, the most attractive and prominent branch on the tree of my interests. I had turned a blind eye to it, which was hard to do considering I stared it in the face three nights of the week and about half of my weekends.

When I announced to my parents that I wanted to be a librarian, they looked at each other knowingly, proud that I had finally seen what I had been trying my hardest not to see: the love I had for my job, the love my job and coworkers had for me, the skills and interests which made me perfect in a library setting, and most of the all, the passion I had been suppressing all along.

When I began to report my new plan to anyone who asked, I felt this passion oozing out of every pore, boiling over all at once like a pot of potatoes. Shamelessly, I declared “I want to be a librarian” and when I did, it felt like the truest phrase I’d ever spoken.

It’s a common thought that libraries are painfully quiet, so quiet they seem even devoid of life. The quiet is often believed to be strictly enforced by tight-lipped, tight-bunned women with pointy noses and glasses that don’t quite fit the way they should. When telling friends and family of my aspirations of becoming a librarian, it wasn’t rare to hear a joke somewhere along the lines of “you’d better practice your shushing”.

Having been to many different public libraries, I can testify that the iconic silence which accompanies most people’s perception of the library is still alive and well in some places, but Washington Public Library was never one of them. The library I claim as my own nearly vibrates with activity on weeknights. Children dash around my legs, squeezing between the onyx bookcart and myself, and hop into the elevator, playing a wildly unsupervised game of tag while their mother checks Facebook, none-the-wiser. Teenagers in the young adult section somehow think it acceptable to play music without headphones. An elderly woman shouts at her husband that her hearing aid has run out of batteries. Wednesday afternoon movies are heard throughout most of the second floor, thanks to our new state-of-the-art speaker system. There is even an immense amount of smoking that happens in the bathroom on stale, cold evenings (“too cold to go outside and do it!”) without the knowledge of the librarians behind the desk, or so they think. And there, at the center of it all: the exhausted librarian, smiling at each patron as he or she walks in while the noise and activity persists, as if it didn’t exist at all.

Checking the bathrooms at the end of the night was always a gamble; public restrooms nearly always are. Most of the time, I was only met with smells: smells of sweat, toilet bowls left semi-clean from their day’s usage, or other less pleasant smells that reminded me of just what went on in there during the day. I lived in fear of the days where I was met with the source of it.

Whether I opened the stall to discover blood in the urinal, wads of chewing tobacco stuck to the beige marble-tiled walls, or what appeared to be the resurgence of dysentery in Washington, Iowa, *someone* had to roll up their sleeves, put on latex gloves, and clean it.

During the work week, I dealt with a lot at my job, from disgruntled patrons to various bodily fluids. Quiet Saturday afternoons were my favorite part of the job; they were a true rarity.

` I relished the sunny Saturday afternoons I spent behind the desk at the library, watching would-be patrons stroll by the library windows without a second thought. They walked their dogs, pushed strollers full of children with one toddler who bounced along behind, or simply basked in the sunshine of an uncharacteristically tolerable November day. Not many craved to visit a square building with watery fluorescent lighting and a distinct smell of must on days like this. As for me, I loved the way I could hear every newspaper page crinkle as it turned, how the quiet seeped beneath my skin until all I could feel was peace.

When I left to attend Central College, I knew I would miss a lot of things about working at the library: my co-workers and supervisors; the atmosphere; and of course those quiet, sunny Saturday mornings where silence rushed to me like the waves in the shallow end of a swimming pool, with a gentle nudge and a warm embrace.

Within the first week of college, I was back behind the circulation desk, pushing a rattley, onyx cart full of books and taking inventory on the third floor of Geisler Library, which was deemed a “quiet zone” for studying and research. As I picked up book after book, scanned the barcode, and put it back in its original spot, I ran the pages through my fingers, checking the publication date and Date Due slip in the back, reading a couple sentences of each before replacing it. Every once in a while, out of the corner of my eye, I would catch a flash of movement, but when I turned, no one and nothing was there. I hadn’t yet adjusted to the lack of activity, still expecting the constant bustle between the stacks: patrons slowly pacing back and forth, slowly browsing through each and every book in the collection and those who knew exactly what they were looking for upon walking in. The stifling silence seemed tangible, a shroud of airborne sand clinging to me even as I left. Not a single newspaper page crunched as its reader desperately tried to put it back together the way it was when he found it, and not a single child peeked around the stacks only to dash back to the kids’ room, giggling and babbling all the way. The phone didn’t ring. While I kept expecting to be approached by a patron in need of assistance, or just one walking by as I worked, they never came, and this lack of discord pressed down on my shoulders while I continued to rifle through some of the oldest books I had ever had the wary pleasure of holding in my hands.

Somehow, the silence differed from that of the public library. The silence at the public library was well-deserved after a long week of taking hurried lunch breaks interrupted by a patron and a shrill, screaming phone (which both presented themselves at the same time, go figure) and calling patrons who are all *just sure* they returned their overdue books. The silence at Geisler Library was uninterrupted and intense. Instead of soaking through me and allowing me to relax after a long week, like the rare silence of a Saturday afternoon, it put me on edge and made me feel as if I were the only person left on Earth; it was humid and oppressive.

It didn’t take me long to ache for the chaos of the weekday public library and the sense of control I had over all of it, whether that control was real or imagined. As I looked over the desk of the public library from my black mesh throne with lumbar support, I saw a chaotically governed kingdom, and I the perceptive ruler with a hand in every corner of it. I’d be there in a blink at any sign of trouble, whether that meant showing a computer-user how to copy and paste (for the third time this week) or dashing to a shelf to catch the row of books about to topple to the floor. I had knowledge of every aspect, able to locate a subject in the Dewey Decimal System without looking it up first and make double-sided copies from two single-sided originals.

As I ran through the list of things I would miss about working at Washington Public Library, tumultuous pandemonium was never on it, but it is truly one of the things I miss the most. I yearn for the corny jokes the patrons told me (“What do you call a midget psychic who escapes from jail? A small medium at large!”) and even the senseless Apocalyptic theories which I got to hear about several times a week. I miss the infallible politeness and the impenetrable smile I gave to each patron who walked into the double-doors, whether they were about to give me trouble or not. I never dreamed I would miss the antics of the weekday more than the solitude of the weekend, but when the chaos is more satisfying than the calm, that is where passion makes its home.