

THE FORT MOXIE BRANCH

Jack McDevitt

Jack McDevitt lives in Brunswick, Georgia. He has been a naval officer, an English teacher, and a customs officer. He has lived in such diverse places as Philadelphia; Chicago; Washington, D.C.; Rhode Island; New Hampshire; North Dakota; and Yokohama, Japan. He did not begin writing until his mid-forties, and (an encouragement to all late-bloomers) he deservedly managed to sell the first story to roll out of his typewriter.

His short fiction has appeared in a variety of markets, and his story "Cryptic" was on the final Hugo ballot in 1984. *The Hercules Text*, his first novel, an Ace Special published under Terry Carr's editorship, received the Philip K. Dick Special Award in 1986 and in a poll of *Locus* readers garnered the laurel as best first novel of

the year. He has also published a colorful novel of far-future conflict, *A Talent for War*, and a pair of stories indicating that war is not inevitable, "Date with Destiny" in Lewis Shiner's *When the Music's Over...* and "Valkyrie" in a volume edited by Harry Harrison and Bruce McAllister and tentatively titled *The Peace Anthology*.

McDevitt has a natural, self-effacing prose style that never raises any barriers between the reader and the tale being told. And ever since hearing him read at an SF convention in Atlanta, I can no longer read his work without hearing his distinctive voice caressing each word—an eerie, but also a strangely comforting, experience.

Of "The Fort Moxie Branch," McDevitt writes: "We lived for a number of years in Pembina, North Dakota (the Fort Moxie of the story). The town is small, population maybe 600. It lies on the Canadian border, along the western edge of an ancient shoreline. The inland sea that once existed there, Lake Agassiz, covered great parts of the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Manitoba.

"You can still make out the general coastal configuration from the air. But Agassiz, in its time the largest of the Great Lakes, is gone. Lost in the meltwaters of the retreating glaciers.

"The missing lake has always struck me as something of an outrage. The ultimate symbol of a relativistic universe where nothing quite survives. And things get lost far too easily. So I built Fort Moxie's branch of a very special library. With a lot of help (by the way) from the story doctors at the Sycamore Hill workshop."

In many ways, this is a wish-fulfillment story for writers, but it is also a strong psychological study of a good man and a moving lament for the mutability—the perishability—of our lives and works. No wonder that "The Fort Moxie Branch" was also a finalist for the Hugo Award for best short story. As is usually the case with a McDevitt story, it resonates in readers' memories as well as in writers'.

A few minutes into the blackout, the window in the single dormer at the top of Will Potter's house began to glow. I watched it from across Route 11, through a screen of box elders, and through the snow which had been falling all afternoon and was now getting heavier. It was smeary and insubstantial, not the way a bedroom light would look, but as though something luminous floated in the dark interior.

Will Potter was dead. We'd put him in the graveyard on the other side of the expressway three years before. The property had lain empty since, a two-story frame dating from about the turn of the century.

The town had gone quiet with the blackout. Somewhere a dog barked, and a garage door banged down. Ed Kiernan's station wagon rumbled past, headed out toward Cavalier. The streetlights were out, as was the traffic signal down at Twelfth.

As far as I was concerned, the power could have stayed off.

It was trash night. I was hauling out cartons filled with copies of *Independence Square*, and I was on my way down the outside staircase when everything had gone dark.

The really odd thing about the light over at Potter's was that it seemed to be spreading. It had crept outside: the dormer began to burn with a steady, cold, blue-white flame. It flowed gradually down the slope of the roof, slipped over the drainpipe, and turned the corner of the porch. Just barely, in the illumination, I could

make out the skewed screens and broken stone steps.

It would have taken something unusual to get my attention that night. I was piling the boxes atop one another, and some of the books had spilled into the street: my name glittered on the bindings. It was a big piece of my life. Five years and a quarter million words and, in the end, most of my life's savings to get it printed. It had been painful, and I was glad to be rid of it.

So I was standing on the curb, feeling very sorry for myself while snow whispered out of a sagging sky.

The Tastee-Freez, Hal's Lumber, the Amoco at the corner of Nineteenth and Bannister, were all dark and silent. Toward the center of town, blinkers and headlights misted in the storm.

It was a still, somehow motionless, night. The flakes were blue in the pale glow surrounding the house. They fell onto the gabled roof and spilled gently off the back.

Cass Taylor's station wagon plowed past, headed out of town. He waved.

I barely noticed: the back end of Potter's house had begun to balloon out. I watched it, fascinated, knowing it to be an illusion, yet still half-expecting it to explode.

The house began to change in other ways.

Roof and corner lines wavered. New walls dropped into place. The dormer suddenly ascended, and the top of the house with it. A third floor, complete with lighted windows and a garret, appeared out of the snow. (In one of the illuminated rooms, someone moved.)

Parapets rose, and an oculus formed in the center of the garret. A bay window pushed out of the lower level, near the front. An arch and portico replaced the porch. Spruce trees materialized, and Potter's old post light, which had never worked, blinked on.

The box elders were bleak and stark in the foreground.

I stood, worrying about my eyesight, holding onto a carton, feeling the snow against my face and throat. Nothing moved on Route 11.

I was still standing there when the power returned: the streetlights, the electric sign over Hal's office, the security lights at the Amoco, gunshots from a TV, the sudden inexplicable rasp of an electric drill. And, at the same moment, the apparition clicked off.

I could have gone to bed. I could have hauled out the rest of those goddamned books, attributed everything to my imagination, and gone to bed. I'm glad I didn't.

The snow cover in Potter's backyard was undisturbed. It was more than a foot deep beneath the half-inch or so that had fallen that day. I struggled through it to find the key he'd always kept wedged beneath a loose hasp near the cellar stairs.

I used it to let myself in through the storage room at the rear of the house. And I should admit that I had a bad moment when the door shut behind me, and I stood among the rakes and shovels and boxes of nails. Too many late TV movies. Too much Stephen King.

I'd been here before. Years earlier, when I'd thought that teaching would support me until I was able to earn a living as a novelist, I'd picked up some extra money by tutoring Potter's boys. But that was a long time ago.

I'd brought a flashlight with me. I turned it on, and pushed through into the kitchen. It was warmer in there, but that was to be expected. Potter's heirs were still trying to sell the place, and it gets too cold in North Dakota to simply shut off the heat altogether.

Cabinets were open and bare; the range had been

disconnected from its gas mooring and dragged into the center of the floor. A church calendar hung behind a door. It displayed March 1986: the month of Potter's death.

In the dining room, a battered table and three wooden chairs remained. They were pushed against one wall. A couple of boxes lay in a corner.

With a bang, the heater came on.

I was startled. A fan cut in, and warm air rushed across my ankles.

I took a deep breath and played the beam toward the living room. I was thinking how different a house looks without its furnishings, how utterly strange and unfamiliar, when I realized I wasn't alone. Whether it was a movement outside the circle of light, or a sudden indrawn breath, or the creak of a board, I couldn't have said. But I *knew*. "Who's there?" I asked. The words hung in the dark.

"Mr. Wickham?" It was a woman.

"Hello," I said. "I, uh, I saw lights and thought—"

"Of course," she said. She was standing back near the kitchen, silhouetted against outside light. I wondered how she could have got there. "You were correct to be concerned. But it's quite all right." She was somewhat on the gray side of middle age, attractive, well-pressed, the sort you would expect to encounter at a bridge party. Her eyes, which were on a level with mine, watched me with good humor. "My name is Coela." She extended her right hand. Gold bracelets clinked.

"I'm happy to meet you," I said, trying to look as though nothing unusual had occurred. "How did you know my name?"

She touched my hand, the one holding the flashlight, and pushed it gently aside so she could pass. "Please follow me," she said. "Be careful. Don't fall over anything."

We climbed the stairs to the second floor, and went into the rear bedroom. "Through here," she said, opening a door that should have revealed a closet. Instead, I was looking into a brightly illuminated space that couldn't possibly be there. It was filled with books, paintings and tapestries, leather furniture and polished tables. A fireplace crackled cheerfully beneath a portrait of a monk. A piano played softly. Chopin, I thought.

"This room won't fit," I said, rather stupidly. The thick quality of my voice startled me.

"No," she agreed. "We're attached to the property, but we're quite independent." We stepped inside. Carpets were thick underfoot. Where the floors were exposed, they were lustrous parquet. Vaulted windows looked out over Potter's backyard, and Em Pyle's house next door. Coela watched me thoughtfully. "Welcome, Mr. Wickham," she said. Her eyes glittered with pride. "Welcome to the Fort Moxie branch of the John of Singletary Memorial Library."

I looked around for a chair and, finding one near a window, lowered myself into it. The falling snow was dark, as though no illumination from within the glass touched it. "I don't think I understand this," I said.

"I suppose it is something of a shock."

Her amusement was obvious, and sufficiently infectious that I loosened up somewhat. "Are you the librarian?"

She nodded.

"Nobody in Fort Moxie knows you're here. What good is a library no one knows about?"

"That's a valid question," she admitted. "We have a limited membership."

I glanced around. All the books looked like Bibles. They were different sizes and shapes, but all were bound in leather.

Furthermore, titles and authors were printed in identical silver script. But I saw nothing in English. The shelves near me were packed with books whose titles appeared to be Russian. A volume lay open on a table at my right hand. It was in Latin. I picked it up and held it so I could read the title: *Historiae, V-XII*. Tacitus. “Okay,” I said. “It must be limited. Hardly anybody in Fort Moxie reads Latin or Russian.” I held up the Tacitus. “I doubt even Father Cramer could handle this.”

Em Pyle, the next-door neighbor, had come out onto his front steps. He called his dog, Preach, as he did most nights at this time. There was no response, and he looked up and down Nineteenth Street, into his own backyard, and *right through me*. I couldn’t believe he didn’t react.

“Coela, who are you exactly? What’s going on here? Who the hell is John of Singletary?”

She nodded, in the way people do when they agree that you have a problem. “Perhaps,” she said, “you should look around, Mr. Wickham. Then it might be easier to talk.”

She retired to a desk, and immersed herself in a sheaf of papers, leaving me to fend for myself.

Beyond the Russian shelves, I found Japanese or Chinese titles. I couldn’t tell which. And Arabic. There was a lot of Arabic. And German. French. Greek. More Oriental.

I found the English titles in the rear. They were divided into American and British sections. Dickens, Cowper, and Shakespeare on one side; Holmes, Dreiser, and Steinbeck on the other.

And almost immediately, the sense of apprehension that had hung over me from the beginning of this business sharpened. I didn’t know why. Certainly, the familiar names in a familiar setting should have eased my disquiet.

I picked up Melville's *Agatha* and flipped through the pages. They had the texture of fine rice paper, and the leather binding lent a sense of timelessness to the book. I thought about the cheap cardboard that Crossbow had provided for *Independence Square*. My God, this was the way to get published.

Immediately beside it was *The Complete Works of James McCorbin*. Who the hell was James McCorbin? There were two novels and eight short stories. None of the titles was familiar, and the book contained no biographical information.

In fact, most of the names were people I'd never heard of. Kemerie Baxter. Wynn Gomez. Michael Kaspar. There was nothing unusual about that, of course. Library shelves are always filled with obscure authors. But the lush binding, and the obvious care expended on these books, changed the rules.

I took down Hemingway's *Watch by Night*. I stared a long time at the title. The prose was vintage Hemingway. The crisp, clear bullet sentences and the factual, journalistic style were unmistakable. Even the setting: Italy, 1944.

Henry James was represented by *Brandenberg*. There was no sign of *The Ambassadors*, or *The Portrait of a Lady*, or *Washington Square*. In fact, there was neither *Moby Dick* nor *Billy Budd*. Nor *The Sun Also Rises* nor *A Farewell to Arms*. Thoreau wasn't represented at all. I saw no sign of Fenimore Cooper or Mark Twain. (What kind of library had no copy of *Huck Finn*?)

I carried *Watch by Night* back to the desk where Coela was working. "This is *not* a Hemingway book," I said, lobbing it onto the pile of papers in front of her. She winced. "The rest of them are bogus too. What the hell's going on?"

"I can understand that you might be a little confused, Mr. Wickham," she said, a trifle nervously. "I'm never sure quite how to explain things."

“Please try your best,” I said.

She frowned. “I’m part of a cultural salvage group. We try to ensure that things of permanent value don’t, ah, get lost.”

She pushed her chair back, and gazed steadily at me. Somewhere in back, a clock ticked ponderously. “The book you picked up when you first came in was—” she paused, “—mislaid almost two thousand years ago.”

“The *Tacitus*?”

“The *Histories Five through Twelve*. We also have his *Annals*.”

“Who *are* you?”

She shook her head. “A kindred spirit,” she said.

“Seriously.”

“I’m being quite serious, Mr. Wickham. What you see around you is a treasure of incomparable value that, without our efforts, would no longer exist.”

We stared at each other for a few moments. “Are you saying,” I asked, “that these are all lost masterpieces by people like Tacitus? That *this*”—I pointed at *Watch by Night*—“is a bona fide Hemingway?”

“Yes,” she said.

We faced one another across the desktop. “There’s a Melville back there too. And a Thomas Wolfe.”

“Yes,” she said. Her eyes were bright with pleasure. “*All of them.*”

I took another long look around the place. Thousands of volumes filled all the shelves, packed tight, reaching to the ceiling. Others were stacked on tables; a few were tossed almost haphazardly on chairs. Half a dozen stood between Trojan horse bookends on Coela’s desk.

“It’s not possible,” I said, finding the air suddenly close and oppressive. “How? How could it happen?”

“Quite easily,” she said. “Melville, as a case in point, became discouraged. He was a customs inspector at the time *Agatha* first came to our attention. I went all the way to London, specifically to allow him to examine my baggage on the way back. In 1875, that was no easy journey, I can assure you.” She waved off my objection. “Well, that’s an exaggeration, of course. I took advantage of the trip to conduct some business with Matthew Arnold and— Well: I’m name-dropping now. Forgive me. But think about having Herman Melville go through your luggage.” Her laughter echoed through the room. “I was quite young. Too young to understand his work, really. But I’d read *Moby Dick*, and some of his poetry. If I’d known him then the way I do now, I don’t think I could have kept my feet.” She bit her lower lip and shook her head, and for a moment I thought she might indeed pass out.

“And he *gave* you the manuscript? Simply because you asked for it?”

“No. Because I knew it for what it was. And he understood why I wanted it.”

“And why do you want it? You have buried it here.”

She ignored the question.

“You never asked about the library’s name.”

“The John of—”

“—Singletary—”

“—Memorial. Okay, who’s John of Singletary?”

“That’s his portrait, facing the main entrance.” It was a large oil of an introspective-looking monk. His hands were buried in dark brown robes, and he was flanked by a scroll and a crucifix. “He was perhaps the most brilliant sociologist who ever lived.”

“I never heard of him.”

“That’s no surprise. His work was eventually ruled profane by his superiors, and either burned or stored away somewhere. We’ve never been sure. But we were able to obtain copies of most of it.” She was out of her seat now, standing with her back to the portrait. “What is significant is that he defined the state toward which he felt the human community should be advancing. He set the parameters and the goals for which the men and women whose works populate this library have been striving: the precise degree of balance between order and freedom; the extent of one’s obligation to external authority; the precise relationships that should exist between human beings. And so on. Taken in all, he produced a schematic for civilized life, a set of instructions, if you will.”

“The human condition,” I said.

“How do you mean?”

“He did all this, and no one knows him.”

“*We* know him, Mr. Wickham.” She paused. I found myself glancing from her to the solemn figure in the portrait. “You asked why we wanted *Agatha*. The answer is that it is lovely, that it is very powerful. We simply will not allow it to be lost.”

“But who will ever get to see it *here*? You’re talking about a novel that, as far as anyone is concerned, doesn’t exist. I have a friend in North Carolina who’d give every nickel he owns to see this book. If it’s legitimate.”

“*We will* make it available. In time. This library will eventually be yours.”

A wave of exhilaration washed over me. “Thank you,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “That may have been misleading. I didn’t mean right now. And I didn’t mean *you*.”

“When?”

“When the human race fulfills the requirements of John of Singletary. When you have, in other words, achieved a true global community, all this will be our gift to you.”

A gust of wind rattled the windows.

“That’s a considerable way off,” I said.

“We must take the long view.”

“Easy for you to say. We have a lot of problems. Some of this might be just what we need to get through.”

“This was once *yours*, Mr. Wickham. Your people have not always recognized value. We are providing a second chance. I’d expect you to be grateful.”

I turned away from her. “Most of this I can’t even recognize,” I said. “Who’s James McCorbin? You’ve got his *Complete Works* back there with Melville and the others. Who *is* he?”

“A master of the short story. One of your contemporaries, but I’m afraid he writes in a style and with a complexity that will go unappreciated during his lifetime.”

“You’re telling me he’s *too* good to get published?” I was aghast.

“Oh, yes. Mr. Wickham, you live in an exceedingly commercial era. Your editors understand that they cannot sell champagne to beer drinkers. They buy what sells.”

“And that’s also true of the others? Kemerie Baxter? Gomez? Somebody-or-other Parker?”

“I’m afraid so. It’s quite common, in fact. Baxter is an essayist of the first order. Unlike the other two, he has been published, but by a small university press, in an edition which sank quickly out of sight. Gomez has written three exquisite novels, and has since given up, despite our encouragement. Parker is a poet. If you know anything about the markets for poetry, I need say no

more.”

We wandered together through the library. She pointed to lost works by Sophocles and Aeschylus, to missing epics of the Homeric cycle, to shelves full of Indian poetry and Roman drama. “On the upper level,” she said, raising her eyes to the ceiling, “are the songs and tales of artists whose native tongues had no written form. They have been translated into our own language. In most cases,” she added, “we were able to preserve their creators’ names.

“And now I have a surprise.” We had reached the British section. She took down a book and passed it to me. William Shakespeare. “His *Zenobia*,” she said, her voice hushed. “Written at the height of his career.”

I was silent for a time. “And why was it never performed?”

“Because it’s a savage attack on Elizabeth. Even he might well have lost his head. We have a major epic by Virgil that was withheld for much the same reason. In fact, that’s why the Russian section is so large. They’ve been producing magnificent novels in the tradition of Tolstoy and Dostoyevski for years, but they’re far too prudent to offer them for publication.”

There were two other Shakespearean plays. “*Adam and Eve* was heretical by the standards of the day,” Coela explained. “And here’s another that would have raised a few eyebrows.” She smiled.

It was *Nisus and Euryalus*. The characters were out of the *Aeneid*. “Homosexual love,” she said.

“But he wished these withheld,” I objected. “There’s a difference between works that have been lost, and those a writer wishes to destroy. You published these against his will.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Wickham. We never do that. To begin with, if Shakespeare had wanted these plays destroyed, he could have handled that detail quite easily. He desired only that they not be

published in his lifetime. Everything you see here,” she included the entire library with a sweeping, feminine gesture, “was given to us voluntarily. We have very strict regulations on that score. And we do things strictly by the book, Mr. Wickham.

“In some cases, by the way, we perform an additional service. We are able, in a small way, to reassure those great artists who have not been properly recognized in their own lifetimes. I wish you could have seen Melville.”

“You could be wrong, you know.”

Her nostrils widened slightly. “About what?”

“Maybe books that get lost deserve to be lost.”

“Some do.” Her tone hardened. “None of those are here. We exercise full editorial judgment.”

“We close at midnight,” she said, appearing suddenly behind me while I was absorbed in the Wells novel, *Starflight*. I could read the implication in her tone: *Never to open again. Not in Fort Moxie. Not for you.*

I returned Wells and moved quickly along, pulling books from the shelves with some sense of urgency. I glanced through *Mendinhal*, an unfinished epic by Byron, dated 1824, the year of his death. I caught individually brilliant lines, and tried to commit some of them to memory, and proceeded on to Blake, to Fielding, to Chaucer! At a little after eleven, I came across four Conan Doyle stories: “The Adventure of the Grim Footman”; “The Branmoor Club”; “The Jezail Bullet”; “The Sumatran Clipper.” My God, what would the Sherlockians of the world not give to have those?

I hurried on with increasing desperation, as though I could somehow gather the contents into myself, and make them available to a waiting world: *God and Country*, by Thomas Wolfe; fresh cartoons by James Thurber, recovered from beneath wallpaper in a

vacation home he'd rented in Atlantic City in 1947; plays by Odets and O'Neill; short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Terry Carr. Here was *More Dangerous Visions*. And there Mary Shelley's *Morgan*.

And through it all, as I whirled through the rice-paper pages, balancing the eerie moonlit lines of A.E. Housman with the calibrated shafts of Mencken, I envied them. Envied them all.

And I was angry.

"You have no right," I said at last, when Coela came to stand by my side, indicating that my time was up.

"No right to withhold all this?" I detected sympathy in her voice.

"Not only that," I said. "Who are you to set yourself up to make such judgments? To say what is great and what is pedestrian?"

"I've asked myself that question many times. We do the best we can." We were moving toward the door. "We have quite a lot of experience, you understand."

The lights dimmed. "Why are you really doing this? It's not for us, is it?"

"Not exclusively. What your species produces belongs to all." Her smile broadened. "Surely you would not wish to keep your finest creations for yourselves?"

"Your people have access to them now?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Back home everyone has access. As soon as a new book is cataloged here, it is made available to everybody."

"Except us."

"We will not do everything for you, Mr. Wickham." She drew

close, and I could almost feel her heartbeat.

“Do you have any idea what it would mean to our people to recover all this?”

“I’m sorry. For the moment, there’s really nothing I can do.”

She opened the door for me, the one that led into the back bedroom. I stepped through it. She followed. “Use your flashlight,” she said.

We walked through the long hallway, and down the stairs to the living room. She had something to say to me, but seemed strangely reluctant to continue the conversation. And somewhere in the darkness of Will Potter’s place, between the magic doorway in the back of the upstairs closet, and the broken stone steps off the porch, I understood! And when we paused on the concrete beside the darkened post light, and turned to face each other, my pulse was pounding. “It’s no accident that this place became visible tonight, is it?”

She said nothing.

“Nor that only I saw it. I mean, there wouldn’t be a point in putting your universal library in Fort Moxie unless you wanted something. Right?”

“I said this was the Fort Moxie *branch*. The central library is located on Saint Simons Island.” The brittleness of the last few moments melted without warning. “But no, you’re right, of course.”

“You want *Independence Square*, don’t you? You want to put my book in there with Thomas Wolfe and Shakespeare and Homer. Right?”

“Yes,” she said. “That’s right. You’ve created a psychological drama of the first water, Mr. Wickham. You’ve captured the microcosm of Fort Moxie and produced a portrait of small town America that has captured the admiration of the Board. And, I

might add, of our membership. You will be interested, by the way, in knowing that one of your major characters caused the blackout tonight. Jack Gilbert.”

I was overwhelmed. “How’d it happen?” I asked.

“Can you guess?”

“An argument with his wife, somehow or other.” Gilbert, who had a different name, of course, in *Independence Square*, had a long history of inept philandering.

“Yes. Afterward, he took the pickup and ran it into the streetlight at Eleventh and Foster. Shorted out everything over an area of forty square blocks. It’s right out of the book.”

“Yes,” I said.

“But he’ll never know he’s in it. Nor will any of the other people you’ve immortalized. Only you know. And only you would *ever* know, were it not for us.” She stood facing me. The snow had stopped, and the clouds had cleared away. The stars were hard and bright in her eyes. “We think it unlikely that you will be recognized in your own lifetime. We could be wrong. We were wrong about Faulkner.” Her lips crinkled into a smile. “But it is my honor to invite you to contribute your work to the library.”

I froze. It was really happening. Emerson. Hemingway. Wickham. I loved it. And yet, there was something terribly wrong about it all. “Coela,” I asked. “Have you ever been refused?”

“Yes,” she said cautiously. “Occasionally it happens. We couldn’t convince Fielding of the value of *Harold Swanley*. Charlotte and Emily Brontë both rejected us, to the world’s loss. And Tolstoy. Tolstoy had a wonderful novel from his youth which he considered, well, anti-Christian.”

“And among the unknowns? Has anyone just walked away?”

“No,” she said. “Never. In such a case, the consequences would be especially tragic.” Sensing where the conversation was

leading, she'd begun to speak in a quicker tempo, at a slightly higher pitch. "A new genius, who would sink into the sea of history, as Byron says, 'without a grave, unknelled, uncoffined, and unknown.' Is that what you are considering?"

"You have *no* right to keep all this to yourself."

She nodded. "I should remind you, Mr. Wickham, that without the intervention of the library, these works would not exist at all."

I stared past her shoulder, down the dark street.

"Are you then," she said at last, drawing the last word out, "refusing?"

"This belongs to *us*," I said. "It is ours. We've produced *everything* back there!"

"I almost anticipated, feared, this kind of response from you. I think it was almost implicit in your book. Will you grant us permission to use *Independence Square*?"

My breath had grown short, and it was hard to speak. "I must regretfully say no."

"I am sorry to hear it. I— You should understand that there will be no second offer."

I said nothing.

"Then I fear we have no further business to transact."

At home, I carried the boxes back up to my living room. After all, if it's that damned good, there has to be a market for it. Somewhere.

And if she's right about rampant commercialism? Well, what the hell.

I pulled one of the copies out, and put it on the shelf, between

Walt Whitman and Thomas Wolfe.

Where it belongs.