



“Lost in the Library” (Photo: Brilliant Flash Fiction)
Librarian’s Choice Writing Contest¹

“I don’t know why I ever listened to you,” whispered Lindsay.

Lost in the Library

Theodore Jerome Cohen

“I don’t know why I ever listened to you,” whispered Lindsay, as if anyone even could have heard her at 11 p.m. in the library of a small community college located several miles east of Holcomb, Kansas. “Oh, don’t be such a killjoy,” Alexa replied. “You could have said ‘No’ when I asked if you wanted to join the scavenger hunt my sorority was sponsoring tonight. As I recall, you were rather excited about it.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t expect it would involve breaking into the college library. Stopping strangers on the street to ask if they had a \$2 bill or driving to the men’s dorms in search of a St. Patrick’s Day hat is one thing, but this is crazy. I’m still trying to figure out how we ended up losing ourselves here, on the second floor. The only thing we were given was a Post-It Note with ‘364’ and the demand to ‘Bring back information on the killers’ scribbled on it.”

“Well, to my mind, this meant finding either a location in town with an address of ‘364’ in which some killers live or lived—fat chance of that—or finding a relevant murder mystery in the library under the 364-call number using the Dewey Decimal System. So, in a way, we’re not *really* lost.”

Lindsay rolled her eyes. “Give me a break. Just because you’re a Library Science major doesn’t mean every time you see a three-digit number, visions of books in a library should pop in your head. What’s so special about the number 364 anyway?”

“Well, for one thing, in library speak, it connotes Criminology,” said Alexa.

“Okay, I get it, I get it.”

¹Contest closed May 30, 2020. There was no joy in Mudville, unfortunately.

“Now, what’s the date today?” Alexa could barely contain her glee in asking this question.

“November 15th.”

“And what’s the nearest town to the west?”

“Holcomb.”

“So?”

“So?” Lindsay gave her friend a blank look.

“Sheesh.” An exasperated look crossed Alexa’s face. “I see I’m gonna have to show you. Follow me.”

With that, she began walking down the aisle, Lindsay in tow. Using a tiny flashlight linked to her key chain for illumination, and letting her forefinger bump from volume to volume on the middle bookshelf, Alexa studied the number printed on the small white label affixed to each book’s spine.

Here and there she paused before moving on until she came upon a book with the call number 364.1/523. It was a thick volume wedged tightly between the books on either side. Using her hands to pry the books apart, she gently eased a well-worn copy of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* from the shelf and handed it to Lindsay.

“Is this what we’ve been looking for?” Lindsay asked.

Alexa nodded. “I’m sure this is what we need to complete the hunt. The number we were given, today’s date, our proximity to Holcomb . . . it all makes sense. Twenty years ago, to the day, two men—Perry Smith and Richard Hickock—murdered Herb Clutter, his wife, and their two teenage kids in Holcomb. All we need to do now is execute—no pun intended—a little midnight requisition of this book, and— What’s wrong, Lindsay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

Lindsay stood frozen; her head tilted to one side. “Did you hear something?”

“No. Did you?”

“Yes! I heard footsteps behind me.”

“Oh, come on, Lindsay—”

“There they are again,” she said, a look of terror on her face. “I’m sure of it. Let’s get outta here!” She turned and bolted for the back of the library, for the window through which they had entered.

Alexa, following in hot pursuit, watched as she turned and disappeared at the end of the aisle. But as Alexa turned the corner and approached the window, Lindsay was nowhere to be seen.

“Lindsay!” she whispered, clutching Capote’s book to her chest. “Where are you?”

There was no answer.

“Come on, Lindsay,” she whispered emphatically. “Quit screwin’ around. Where are you? You couldn’t have gotten lost!”

Then she, too, heard footsteps behind her.