

When Borders was Alive and Well

by Nonnie Augustine

I'd been working for two years as a barista in a Starbuck's in a giant, two-story Borders in an upscale mall on Rt. 355, a main artery between Washington D.C., and Frederick, Maryland. I'd finished my M.F.A in 2000 and was trying to build up steam for more grad school--steam and money. I wrote poetry. So, the accepted way to make a living doing that was with a college-level teaching job, which meant a Ph.d. Jeez louise, I hated the thought of doing the doctorate. However, I was tired to the bone of making fancy coffee drinks.

On one of these endless days an eighty-something man came up to the counter with a short stack of books. (We took all kinds of purchases at the café register.) I could see a large magnifying glass jutting out of a pocket of his tweed jacket. He gave off a spicy aroma as if he wore this jacket while he cooked curries and burned incense in a closed room every day. I liked him.

"I'd like a coffee, too, please. A plain, black coffee. Medium? Grande, I suppose? And could I have one of those blueberry scones?" His voice sounded rusty. I wondered how much use it got.

I smiled at him and scanned his books and added in the coffee and pastry. When I started working at Borders, I'd made a point of noticing what people were buying, but I'd stopped looking at titles after a month or two. The store sold bestsellers, mysteries, Harry Potters, celebrity bios, diet books, and never, ever poetry.

"That's \$64.76, sir." Damn, but there was something about this old guy that tugged at me. Should he really be spending so much on books? He looked more like someone who'd do better searching for

something to read in a Goodwill stack or a library, not in a Borders. That's where I'd be looking if I didn't have the employee discount, well, even with the discount. I was poor but young and strong, though. This man looked poor but frail and definitely frayed. He was wearing an old canvas hat that might have been green once and the sleeves of his sweater were so stretched they covered his hands up to the middle of his fingers. And there was that magnifying glass. He handed me a Visa card. I automatically asked him for his I.D.

"I haven't driven in years, Miss, but here's my driver's license. It expired four years ago." He was leaning against the counter and I had a sudden urge to hurry up and get him his coffee. But I dutifully checked everything and finally the penny dropped and I registered his name, "Edward Lake."

"That's fine, Mr. Lake. Just sign here. Why don't you find a table and I'll take your coffee and scone to you in a second."

"Thank you. That's kind of you." He picked up his bag and turned to the tables. I noticed his cane, then, and that he wore his topsiders like backless slippers. He wasn't wearing socks! I wanted to buy him some socks!

Just as I brought him his order, my co-barista came back from break and I rushed off on mine. On the poetry shelf (only one and I knew it by heart) I grabbed a thick anthology. Back at the counter, I paid for it, even though I had the damn book at home, and I went over to Mr. Lake.

"Excuse me, sir. Would you autograph this for me?" I'd opened the book to one of his poems. Edward Lake and his wife Constance had written poems in their letters to each other during the two years he'd fought in France and Italy during World War II. Edward's first volume of poems was published in 1946, but his editor also collected the couple's letters and published them a year later. "Edward and

Constance" became one of the most famous books about the war, even though it was poetry. It seemed every couple who had been separated by the war had read and found something of themselves in the poems. By 1950 it had gone into its third printing. (I knew all this, and much more, because I'd written a paper about the Lakes when I was an undergraduate. But, everyone knows something about Edward and Constance Lake. No, I'll amend that. Everyone should know something about Edward and Constance Lake. I think so.)

With great dignity, the poet took his magnifying glass out of his pocket and peered at the page. Then he looked at his wife's poem on the facing page.

"Constance died three years ago," he said. "Oh, she was a fine poet. And wife. A fine wife. I don't do so well without her... Yes! Of course I'll autograph this for you, my sweet girl. And after I finish my snack, I'm going to go buy some socks. Constance always did the clothes shopping, you know. She wouldn't like it if she knew I'd lost all my socks."

He beamed at me and signed his name under "You Saved My Life Today." It's my treasure, that book. Every now and then the author would show up at Borders for a snack and a few new books. I'd insist on having a break when he came in so that I could sit with him and talk about poetry. I didn't care if I got sacked, but somehow I didn't. After six months or so he stopped coming by. And a few months after that, I went back to grad school.

