The Complete Works of Jacob Apgar

The words floated on my screen, seeming inevitable, even damning:

"Dear Mr. Apgar, We found your story to be clever and entertaining. Unfortunately, it does not meet our needs at the present time. We wish you the best of luck in continuing to submit your stories in the future."

I stared at the email for a long moment and punched the button to turn my cell phone off. It was at least the tenth rejection for that particular story. I should be used to it by now. It always happened the same way: I would submit the story to yet another web zine, pumping up my confidence to convince myself that this time I would be accepted. Sometimes the zine would require that my story fit in with the current theme issue, and I would alter the story slightly to go with the theme. Every zine had a different feel, even without theme issues, and I found myself kowtowing to them, trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Less than a week later, I would get an email and, seeing that it was from the latest zine, I would feel a jolt of unreasonable hope, only to have it dashed when I read the email. It always took a few weeks for me to get up the courage to submit again.

I had never gotten a single one of my stories published, even for free.

At least I had a steady job to support me. I looked around myself as I sat there in the public library break room. I did like books, after all. I was sure I'd enjoy seeing my own name in a book one day, but today was not that day. I looked at the old-fashioned clock on the wall. My

break was over. I stood up and pushed my wooden book cart out of the room. I had a list of books ordered by patrons from all over the place, and my job was to find the books on the library shelves and bring them to the Circulation desk to be processed and sent to Shipping. Yes, the library Shipping department had an actual fleet of trucks! It was as if the library was actually serious about serving the public! Too bad so few people outside the library knew this.

I had earned a reputation as a magical finder of books. “If you can’t find something, ask Jacob,” the saying went. Really, there was nothing magical about it. I just had a working knowledge of alphabetical and numeric order, that was all. Plus long experience with how the library worked and where everything was. I had been in this job for almost a quarter century. It was part time, minimum wage, and had no benefits, but I liked it because it gave me time to pursue my writing dreams. A small inheritance from my late parents helped to support me.

I squinted at my list as I pushed my empty cart down the hall. Before going to break, I had brought a full cart of books to Circulation and grabbed an empty cart to fill with books after break. I guess you could say I was a dedicated employee. I made it a game to see how many books I could find by quitting time. I was really annoyed when I couldn’t find something. It was either completely gone, on the wrong shelf, in Stacks, or tied up after being returned to Circulation. I had already looked for most of the books on today’s list, and now I was looking in the secondary hiding places for the leftovers. I decided to look in Stacks first.

I glanced through a glass panel in a door as I went down the hall. Through the glass, I could see the landing of a little-used stairway. There was an elevator that used to stop at that landing, but it had been broken for years. The thing was so old that the part it needed was no longer made, so the repair job was abandoned.

I slowed down. As I understood the structure of the building, that elevator shaft would put me down in the Stacks right where I needed to be to find my books. I decided to see if the elevator was working again.

I opened the door and pushed my cart onto the landing. I pressed the call button next to the elevator doors, and was rewarded with the whine of a motor. Eventually the elevator doors opened, and I pushed my cart inside.

I paused to look at the floor buttons. Most of them were straightforward numbers, floors 1, 2, 3, etc., but some could be confusing to the uninitiated. M was for Mezzanine, which had a kind of balcony overlooking the floor below it; US was Upper Stacks, a storage area containing circulating books from every department; LS was Lower Stacks, where Shipping was: it had a ramp and loading dock for the trucks.

And then, there at the bottom, was a button marked LLS.

I had never been to that floor before.

Maybe they had just added it, or something. Maybe this elevator was the only one that went that far. My curiosity was piqued. I thought I had seen everything in the library, but apparently there was always something new to explore, even after twenty-five years. I pressed the button for LLS.

The elevator doors creaked shut, and the elevator bounced up and down a little. I rode the bounces calmly, joking to myself, “It’s a bounce-house elevator!” It didn’t scare me. A lot of the elevators in the library did the same thing. All the old-timers in the library cultivated a fatalistic sense of humor, and I was no exception.

With a bang and a rattle, I was off. I watched the floors light up sequentially over the door as the elevator moved past them. 3, 2, M, 1, US, LS… I waited for the elevator to start

slowing down as it approached LLS. Instead it seemed to speed up. Long after we passed Lower Stacks, the LLS floor indicator still had not lit up. Apparently LLS was very deep underground.

The elevator was still speeding up. I began to sweat as I listened for the shriek of tortured metal, and I could already smell the stench of superheated steel. I hit the stop button, but to no avail. The walls of the elevator began to tremble. The overhead lights flickered. Then, after what seemed like an hour, the elevator slowed down and came to a gentle stop.

The elevator doors opened, and I pushed my cart out onto the floor. I leaned on the cart for support with one hand as I wiped sweat off my face with the other hand. Luckily the elevator hadn't crashed. It hadn't even made any noises out of the ordinary. Good. I wouldn't have to wait here for rescue and was free to explore LLS.

At first, it appeared to be a typical Stacks storage area. A single aisle stretched away in both directions, with shelves of books on one side and a smooth metal wall on the other side. A four-digit number with three letters beneath it was stenciled in large type on the wall, kind of like "remember this floor" stencils in a parking garage. Unlike other Stacks areas in the library, this area had no moldy odor or oppressive humidity. It was not dark and spooky; a long row of florescent lights kept the shelves crisply lit. All the books were in brand-new condition; it seemed more like a bookstore than a library.

The spines of each book were plastered with labels. At the top was a color-coded label displaying the first three letters of the subject: LIT, ART, SCI, HIS, FIC, etc. At the bottom was the four-digit number and the first three letters of the author's last name. The books were not grouped by subject; instead they seemed to be alphabetical by author's last name. I eventually realized that the four-digit number was the book's publication year. I didn't realize it sooner

because it was so far outside my own lifetime. To people of my generation, any year with a 19 or 20 at the start of it was recognizable, but most centuries before or after that were gibberish.

I opened a few books and looked at the publication date to confirm. The impossible was true after all: these books were all published centuries into my future. I looked around: among the familiar "paper book" format were movies, TV shows, music, and audio books, all with their own futuristic formats. I couldn't even begin to comprehend one format, which looked like a crystal sphere floating in the air a few inches above its shelf. The paper books predominated, however. I decided this was because paper books were the simplest form of data storage. All the other formats needed electricity or some sort of player; with books you could just open them and start reading. Books had been around for thousands of years, and they weren't done yet.

I decided to get a feel for the layout. The author's names on these shelves were closer to the start of the alphabet than the end, so I headed toward the start. It was always easier to get oriented by finding one end or the other of a grouping. It was how I was so successful at finding books. I pushed my cart down the aisle ahead of me; there was no telling what I might find to put on it. The aisle had a slight curve to it as I walked along. When I finally reached the beginning of the alphabet, I found a straight aisle at right angles to the first one. Curving aisles branched off the straight aisle, with sequential publication dates stenciled on the ends of the shelves. I probably can't describe it right, but here goes: the books were grouped by year, then alphabetical by author within that year. The shelves were arranged in a huge spiral, with the very first books in history at the center, curving outward to the future. The straight aisles made it easier to get to the different years. From above, it must look like a giant spider web.

This was a magical place that contained all the stories ever created, past present and future, and it seemed to exist outside of Time and Space. I could hardly wait to exploit it.

I considered my options. I could steal and sell rare books in mint condition, or patent one of those crystal sphere formats, or steal a future history book and get rich predicting things. The future was limitless!

My stomach grumbled. I looked at my watch. Way past quitting time. I would have to call it a day and go home to dinner. Tomorrow I would come back with food and supplies and really explore this place properly. I pushed my cart back the way I had come.

At least I *thought* it was the way I had come. I had come only a little way, just enough to get the lay of the land. Why was it taking so long to get to the elevator? I licked my lips. I fondly remembered the candy bar and Mountain Dew I had snacked on in the break room, about a hundred years ago.

My finely honed sense of direction told me that I was where the elevator should be. If I continued down the aisle, I would be going away from it. I looked at the metal wall on one side of the aisle. It should be here! My stomach growled again, and I started to drool. Maybe part of the wall had closed over the elevator doors when I wasn't looking, making the elevator invisible. And maybe I didn't have such a good sense of direction as I thought I did, and I was interpreting the layout all wrong.

I got out my cell phone, but its batteries were dead. I couldn't see any recharge sockets anywhere.

I fought down my hunger and a growing sense of panic. All I had to do was sit down and wait. That was the best thing to do when a person was lost. This place looked well cared for; any minute now someone would be along to clean it and would find me. Even if the library was closed for the day, they would open tomorrow, and I wouldn't starve to death overnight.

I lay down in the aisle and eventually fell asleep.

I woke up thirsty, with my muscles twitching with mild cramps. I couldn't tell whether it was morning or not; I was deep underground with round the clock florescent lighting. I got up stiffly and looked around. There were the shelves: the author's names, closer to A than Z, with the alien-looking publication year. I looked down the aisle, first in the A direction, then in the Z direction. I took a couple more steps toward Z. I hadn't explored in that direction before, so I took a good look down the aisle.

In the Z direction, something was poking out into the aisle. Most of it was hidden by the curve of the aisle, but there was definitely something there.

I stumbled toward the object. As I got closer, I saw a pair of work boots. Someone was sitting in the aisle! It was probably a janitor taking a break. He could lead me out of here. I rushed forward and started babbling. My voice was so weak I had to clear my throat and start again.

"Good morning!" I said. "Can you tell me where the elevator is, uh, sir?"

The man was perfectly still, with an open book pages-side-down over his face. "Sir?" I said, and lifted the book off his face.

A desiccated skull grinned up at me. I gasped and took a step backward. The man had been dead for a long, long time. The clothes he was wearing weren't much clue to his identity—just normal jeans and shirt. I hadn't heard about any missing staff members. Maybe he was a patron who had found his way into the library staff area, and, unfortunately, to here.

That proved it. Nobody was coming to my rescue. This guy probably waited for help too, and look where it got him.

Now what? This underground labyrinth contained the entire knowledge and imagination of the human race. There ought to be some books here that could help me. Could I find some

books on survival? Maybe some *edible* books on survival? It seemed redundant, but perhaps there were some maps of this very place, with the exits clearly marked. The problem was, the collection was way too big. I couldn't even think of how to begin searching for subjects that might help me in particular, especially since the books weren't arranged by subject.

I remembered one book that I enjoyed browsing through: A Century of Rochester Short Story Writers. It was a reference volume that was published at the turn of every century. I used to look up published authors and reassure myself that I would get published someday too. The regular library had the 19th and 20th century editions. Maybe this place had the 21st century edition. If I was in it, it might be proof that I had survived.

I pointed the front of my cart at the end of the aisle, and then down the cross aisle toward the year 2100. It was an exhausting journey. I had hundreds of years to plow through. The collection was so vast it was like climbing Mount Everest. I felt each year as I passed it. My extreme thirst, headaches and dizzy spells made it seem like I was aging rapidly.

Finally I reached the 2100 aisle. I started looking at C for Century, since there was no one author's name to sort it by. The closer I got to finding it, the faster my heart pounded in my chest and the dryer my mouth became. I hoped they hadn't published it some other year instead of precisely in 2100. They were always precise about it with the other editions.

At last, I found the book, recognizing the ornate design on the spine. I started panting as I slid the book off the shelf and opened it up. It was the size of a telephone book, and organized like one. It was just a list of local Rochester short story writers, alphabetical by last name. The sheer number of authors made it seem as though every man, woman and child in Rochester was a published writer, but I had to consider that these entries spanned an entire century of writing. Each entry included titles of works and years they were published.

My hands were shaking so bad that I nearly dropped the book. The shelves started to swirl around me and I sat down hard in the aisle, setting the book down on the floor beside me. I had to get a grip. How important was it for me to find my name in this book? After years of rejection, I was close to getting proof of the recognition I craved. Would it destroy me to fail to find any mention of me here? Not really. My sense of denial was strong enough that I would just assume I had moved somewhere else and published my stories there instead. However, I had no way of proving that, since A Century of Rochester Short Story Writers was the only reference book I could look up here.

After I counted to twenty and my breathing slowed down again, I opened the volume and paged through it to the A's, and then to Apgar. And there it was! Apgar, Jacob. I couldn't believe it. I opened my eyes wide, stared at the entry, closed my eyes tight, then opened them and stared again. I uttered a loud crazy laugh. There was only one work listed next to my name, "Tales from the Other Side: the Complete Works of Jacob Apgar." I noted the publication date, in the latter half of the 21st century.

I put the valuable volume (valuable because it had *my* name in it) on my cart and practically floated down the aisle. My stories had been published! And I was going to live, after all! I didn't know which revelation gave me more joy.

Inevitably, uncertainties began to creep in. What if this was some other Jacob Apgar, and not me? The book didn't provide a complete bio. And if it *was* me, there was no clue as to how I escaped from the labyrinth and returned to the surface world to safely publish my work. Maybe if I tracked down my Complete Works, I would find out.

I maneuvered my cart back down the curved aisle and down the straight aisle, heading for the year my works had been published. My head throbbed painfully and I leaned on the cart as

waves of dizziness passed over me. It didn't bother me, however. I had the strength of my convictions. I had been *published*! My stories were being read! My writing was no longer a useless effort, benefitting nobody. Somebody might even *like* my stories. Hey, it could happen.

Finally I found the appropriate publication year aisle and went down it, looking at the A's for Apgar. At last I found it. "Tales from the Other Side: the Complete Works of Jacob Apgar." I paged to the table of contents, noting the familiar titles of all the stories I had written over the years. And yes, there was a Foreword. I opened to the appropriate page, preparing to be dazzled by an account of my ingenious escape.

"On the afternoon of [here it gave what I still thought of as yesterday's date], Jacob Apgar disappeared while working as a page at the Rochester Central Public Library. He never clocked out that evening, and he never showed up to work the next morning. His boss knew something was wrong, and called Jacob's family and the police. The police conducted an exhaustive search of the library and Jacob's neighborhood. Eventually the search was called off, but library staff and patrons continued to have 'Jacob Sightings.'

"'I saw him as clearly as I see you now," a staff member stated. "He was pushing his cart along, normal as you please, in the Upper Stacks area. He grinned and gave me a thumbs-up, and I realized I could see through him. Then he vanished into thin air.'"

I lifted my eyes from the page. Did these sightings count as proof that I had escaped from the labyrinth? Only if I returned to my normal life instead of just "haunting" people. I resumed reading.

"Jacob's relatives consulted an estate lawyer to legally manage his affairs. They had discovered an extensive collection of short story manuscripts among Jacob's belongings, and were eager to publish them.

“’Jacob was very passionate about his writing, and his deepest shame was that he never got published. We think this is what Jacob would have wanted,’ Jacob’s cousin said.

“Jacob’s stories were submitted for publication at the height of the ‘ghost’ craze, and, ultimately, his work was published in this volume. Looking over the short stories he created, it is easy to see that Mr. Apgar was a misunderstood genius, overlooked in his own time. Far be it from me to spoil the surprises of the following stories: savor them slowly, for their like will never come again. And Jacob Apgar, wherever you may be: Thank you.”

I closed the book. Well. I was no closer to finding a way out of the labyrinth, but maybe I didn’t need one. The Foreword had hinted strongly that my disappearance and “haunting” of the library was what had sold the book. If I returned now it would not only mess up the timeline but it would mess up my chances for publication. An author’s ghost haunting a library was the kind of publicity no amount of money could buy.

So I couldn’t escape the labyrinth. Big deal. I was going to die someday anyway. I might die, my flesh might rot, just another skeleton caught in the spider web, but my words would live on forever in this eternal library.

I guess I could live with that.

The End