

FAT HIPPIE BOOKS

Over a pitcher of beer in the bar at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, Greg Webster examined Brian Gilbert's luggage, two pieces of which were remarkable. "What's the guitar for?" he asked as Brian sat down at the small table. Greg himself had arrived at the bar first and ordered the pitcher.

"Oh, are you drinking now?" Brian asked in turn, vaguely suspicious. Just as Greg knew that Brian didn't play the guitar, so Brian knew that Greg didn't drink anymore.

Greg answered Brian's question simply by taking another swig of beer. Glancing around the nearly empty bar to make sure no one was looking, Brian set the guitar case in his lap and opened it to reveal a gleaming aluminum sword: fantastic, futuristic, with a jewel-encrusted hilt and jagged barbs climbing up one side of the faux-Celtic-etched blade. He explained the guitar case: "I was worried that they wouldn't let me on the bus with a sword."

"You know, that sword is dysfunctional," Greg remarked.

"I think you've told me that before," Brian replied, snapping the case shut.

"Those barbs might look cool," Greg nevertheless went on to explain, "but they would just get stuck in a guy's guts if you ever stabbed anyone with it."

As Greg knew, the sword was the trademark prop of Brian's *Books of Blut* fantasy book series, a silver sword for decapitating vampires—thus in effect obviating the need for stabbing. Brian didn't bother reiterating this point, as, in any event, it still didn't explain the barbs. Instead, unbidden, he swung his second piece of unusual luggage, a tall, narrow hatbox, onto the table and opened it. Removing the helmet to match the sword, he smilingly placed it upon his head. The helmet was made of a metallic-looking plastic, as an actual metal helmet would have been too heavy to wear around comfortably, not

to mention too costly for his publisher's limited promotional budget to bear.

"You look ridiculous," Greg, who had not seen the helmet before, said. "Are you really gonna wear that thing?"

"Just for when I make my entrance to the reading, then I'll take it off."

"Well, if you wear that shit around me I'm gonna pretend I don't know you."

Brian was making a tour of several book fairs and independent bookstores across the country, and Greg, a writer himself and deeply envious of Brian's tiny measure of renown, was tagging along for the ride. Though he considered it a silly reason for a trip, nevertheless, Greg thought excitedly as they boarded the bus in the dreary, smoggy garage, they were ON THE ROAD. It was a dream they both shared: to hit the road, drinking, screwing, fighting, and writing about their exploits. Both men had fallen prey to the Beat mythology, Greg in his college years more than twenty-five years before, and Brian soon after he came to work at the bookstore a mere ten years ago, straight out of college himself, when Greg—his chief influence in this obsession—had already been in business for almost seven years.

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The bookstore where they both worked, Greg as owner and manager and Brian as "night manager," would most likely, barring unforeseen circumstances, be forced to close very soon. This put a damper on their excursion. But they had planned the trip a long time beforehand, and had worked it out with the other three, part time, employees of the bookstore, who were happy to have the extra hours. Business was always slow in the summer anyway, and what the hell, it looked like it was now or never. Who knew where they'd be working, or living, this time next year.

Greg had started his shop, the (at-the-time) aptly named Fat Hippie Books, in the mid-eighties on a burned-out block of New York's East Village. The shop was around the corner from the famous punk venue CBGB and the former office of the Yipster Times. Down the block was the Hell's Angel's clubhouse. When he moved in, the store was right across the street from a rubble-strewn lot where junkies shot up. Now, in 2004, there was a brand new condo building there. The neighborhood had gentrified, but the bookstore remained the same: aged tomes spilling off the sagging wooden shelves onto unstable piles rising up from the creaking floor. And when the door popped open with a clatter of bells, plate glass, old boards and rusty hinges, a gust of wind might set the dust to swirling, some of the same dust maybe as back in the eighties, and patrons would catch a whiff of that unmistakable used bookstore smell. And these patrons, each of that furtive, clandestine race who frequent such places, would feel that familiar tingle of recognition deep in their brain stems that told them instinctively what this place was about: the preservation of knowledge, the suspension of time.

Which is a bit ironic, for, as the name would suggest, the shop was dedicated to such once-cutting-edge movements as hippie, Beat, and punk literature, and to the literature of the counterculture in general. Ensnared among these unlikely relics, and less well preserved than many, was Greg himself. As the neighborhood improved, and the bookstore stayed the same, so Greg declined: his long blond hair, once a heavy flag of pride and resistance, had with age become wispy, balding on top, mostly gray. Though he knew it would look better cut short, out of habit and a sense of duty to the image of the store he still kept it long, sometimes wearing a bandana tied on the top.

There was nothing much he could do about his weight: Greg had become slim due to gallbladder surgery a few years back, and though he looked and felt healthier than he had before the procedure, he couldn't help but see himself as a pale

shell of the portly, wisecracking, young writer who founded the shop almost twenty years before. Every day Greg waited for someone to burst through the door and ask: “Where the hell is the fat hippie?” and was slightly amazed that it hasn’t happened yet. Oh well, at least he was taller than average, so he still had a commanding presence; and the name of the shop was, of course, intended to be rather tongue-in-cheek anyway. On the day of the bus trip, he wore jeans and a black jacket that was a couple sizes too big for him. Though he usually wore t-shirts to sit around the bookshop, that day he had on a white collar shirt and a string tie with a silver arrowhead clasp. He didn’t need the bandana because he wore a brand new, black leather cowboy hat.

In the late afternoon and evening, sitting behind his huge wooden desk with his feet propped up, Greg held court. For the bookshop was a neighborhood hangout, and a ragtag crew of East Village misfits—dropouts and hipsters, Hispanic slam poets, long-haired psychedelic street artists and grungy squatters and activists, authors of self-published tomes, guys who wrote poems on the sidewalk in chalk, lawyers and stock-brokers who hated their jobs, once in awhile a stray Hell’s Angel—would drop by throughout the day to sit on stools and milk crates and talk to Greg, or, more accurately, *listen* to Greg as he held forth on literature, the counterculture, and life in general. Though decidedly a masculine environment, at least once a week the bookstore held a poetry/literary reading of some sort, and then the Bohemians of the fair sex turned out in force. Though Greg had his groupies, many of the young women these days wore black accented with purple or red, dyed their hair to match, sported tattoos, piercings and silver jewelry, and read erotic poetry with S&M and vampire themes. They were there, for the most part, because of Brian.

Among Greg’s dwindling female fan base had been his wife, Cheryl, a playwright working a day job at an ad agency, who used to run one of the reading series, setting out the wine and introducing the evenings’ readers. They had been divorced