



THE PICKWICK

The Pickwick Bookshop on Hollywood Boulevard, where I got a job as a shipping/receiving clerk in March of 1969, was not a four-star landmark, but if you lived in Southern California and read books – that's hundreds of people right there -- you knew of its three stories of stories. It was founded by Louis Epstein in 1931, during the worst days of the Depression – Scott Fitzgerald mentioned it in a *New Yorker* story -- and was swallowed up by the B. Dalton chain in 1976.

In my memory it is right next to Graumann's Chinese Theatre, but in fact it is a block away. Even though I toiled way back in a back room, full of torn cardboard and packing slips, the place radiated glamor for me.

Writers were always dropping into the store to see how their books were doing. They went to the shelves and touched them, physically, for reassurance. Fading movie stars drifted in to see their spines exposed on the biography shelves. Personalities like

Charles Bukowski, Jack Lalanne, Otto Preminger, Mason Williams, Eva Gabor, Timothy Leary, Tiny Tim, and of course, Sam Yorty.

I especially remember a self-help book by a man from Venice -- *Keep Fit at Seventy*. It had a picture of the author on the cover, in training trunks, his hairy a silvery mane, and his arms and legs and chest all quivery with dynamic tension. He looked great. Problem was, he had written the book ten years earlier. Now, when he came in to examine it on the racks, it was clear time had taken its toll on him. He was now about 85, and his posture was sagging, his shoulders rounded, and that toothsome smile was replaced by something tired and forced, and only falsely happy.

We had gurus and glamor queens, how-to's and hobos, every kind of writer dropping in on us. There was even a genuinely literary contingent. One of our floor salesmen was a thin, reedy-voiced man, whose name was Landor French, named after Walter Savage Landor. His big claim in life was a poem in the *Southern Review*, which he kept a laminated copy of, on a wallet-sized card, in like four point type. He whipped it out for me once -- it was very high-faluting and illusive. It was his high-water mark.

There was another man who worked there named Vince Rossi. Small and dark-eyed and dramatic, half Heathcliff and half Davy Jones, he befriended me, sensing I was someone with whom he could share his deepest suicidal thoughts. He told me he intended some day to drive out into the Mojave Desert, get under his car, poke holes in his gas tank, and stagger off into the wavering sands to die. He got great pleasure laying out this plan to me. He also told it to a skeptical fellow employee named Jaye, whose calves I greatly admired, always sheathed in taut white knee-high socks. Jaye and I put our heads together sometimes to do a Vince check, to see what latest depressed, monomaniacal ravings he had shared.

By summer, Vince had done exactly as he promised, gone into the desert, abandoned his car, and disappeared. It wasn't for five years

or so that I learned it was a hoax, when, as editor of a poetry magazine in Minneapolis, I got a submission from him. I never told him I sussed him out. But I thought of the wife and daughter in the valley that he abandoned.

The manager of the store was a mutton-chopped gentleman named Stan, very jolly and intelligent, a Pickwickian cartoon of literacy, rubbing his hands together as he walked among the workers, conveying with his hands the satisfactions of the low-margin book business.

And my colleague in the back room was a middle-aged black man named Albert. I was receiving, and he was shipping, which was harder to do, and where mistakes were more expensive to the store.

I was scared of Albert. He was big and lugubrious, and his eyes seemed impassive and cold. But he was very patient with me. He showed me where the bandaids were -- this job was paper-cut city -- and what to do when what was on the invoice simply didn't match what was in the boxes. You set it aside until the matter could be resolved, sometimes for months

After my first month, Albert stopped coming in to work. He had stomach cancer, and was undergoing cobalt radiation therapy. He visited a couple of times, but he was very sick. He wanted to see that the department was running all right.

To me, I liked the work because of the books and the glamor. But to Albert, what mattered was that the packages were being dispatched in a timely fashion to where they went. That it was Shakespeare or Hardy in the boxes was immaterial to Albert. That's why he was the professional, and why I, who took off in a rented van the weekend that California slid into the ocean, would never be more than an amateur.

But that is another story.

