

ATG Fiction Page — “Old Friends, New Eyes”

by **Jill Coupe** (1816 Sulgrave Ave., Baltimore, MD 21209; Phone: 410 466-1478) <jill.coupe@att.net>

Editor's Note: *Jill Coupe is the first winner of our ATG Fiction Page Contest. Congratulations Jill! We know you will enjoy Jill's submission “Old Friends, New Eyes.”*

If you are working on the great American novel, short story, or poetry, here's your chance to get into print and reach thousands of readers starved for fiction that tells the story of libraries and librarians, publishing and bookselling. We are open to any original works — your imagination is the limit. Send your submissions to <kstrauch@comcast.net> and you could be a winner too! — KS

He shut his office door and motioned to the two upholstered chairs beside the window. Vrai wasn't sure what she should call him. Dr. Leigh? Frank?

“I'm delighted you could come this afternoon,” he said. His light gray suit matched his eyes and beard and hair. He plugged in a hotplate on the cabinet behind his desk. Above the cabinet hung an oil painting of Napoleon. “As the new director, I'm planning to meet with each of the departments,” he said. “Since you are the art history library, it seemed easiest to begin with you. May I brew you some tea?”

“Oh please don't go to any trouble.” Vrai sat down. Was this a social visit?

“No trouble at all,” he said. “I find the ritual immensely soothing. This is French tea, Empereur Chen-Nung, from Mariage Freres, named for the Chinese emperor who discovered tea long before the birth of Christ.”

He explained each step with the flair and enthusiasm of a TV chef. “The ancient Chinese texts say you should use water from a fast-running stream, since it's thought to be more pure than river water. But the tap water here in Baltimore is really quite good.” He took an aluminum kettle into his private lavatory.

The kettle sizzled when he set it on the hotplate. As the water approached the boil, he poured a little into a blue china teapot and swirled it around. “This step is called ‘rinsing.’ It warms the pot.” He emptied the rinsed pot in the lavatory sink and spooned in tea from a tin. “Four teaspoons.” He then rinsed another pot, a white one, and two teacups.

Vrai had never watched a man brew tea before. Her husband used tea bags. Bob lived in Seattle now. A few months after he began his new job, Daphne, one of his jogging buddies, moved to Seattle, too. After that, Bob stopped asking Vrai when she was going to come out and job hunt.

“There are different stages of boiling.” Frank popped open the kettle's lid. “I like to follow the ancient advice of Yu Lu. In the first stage, the water is quiet and resembles fish eyes. In the second, audible bubbles look like pearls on an eternal string. I wait for the third stage — loud, majestic ocean waves.” With a flourish, he lifted the kettle and poured boiling water into the blue pot. “Enough water to cover the leaves. And then a little bit more. The leaves expand, you see, while steeping.” He set the kettle on a trivet, unplugged the hotplate, and glanced at his watch. “Steep the leaves for three and a half minutes.”

Using a silver gadget with a wooden handle, he strained the dark tea into the cups until they were half full. Then he strained the rest of the tea into the white pot. To the tea in the cups and the tea in the pot he added just the right amount of recently boiled water.

“Sugar?” he asked.

“Please,” Vrai said.

Using small tongs, he released a sugar cube into her cup.

“Thank you.” Vrai accepted the cup and saucer.

Balancing his own cup of tea, he settled carefully into the second chair. “I taught my dear wife to brew tea. It's the secret, I think, to our long and happy marriage. Whenever Celeste and I need to have a serious talk, one of us brews tea. There's the obligation then to be completely honest, no matter how painful the truth may be. One cannot lie while drinking tea. Brew rhymes with true.”

Where was all this leading? Beyond the Venetian blinds, the autumn sky was sapphire blue.

“I understand you and I have something in common.” Frank sipped his tea. “A commuter marriage.”

Surely he didn't know that Daphne had followed Bob to Seattle. Or that Vrai had spent the previous weekend with Lloyd, who was married to Marianne. Vrai blushed — the infernal curse of a redhead. Was Frank coming on to her?

With smooth courtesy, he rescued them both. “My wife stayed in Philadelphia when I took this job. Our son wanted to finish high school there. But Celeste will be joining me in June. We're counting the days. More tea?”

“Not yet, thanks. It's really very good.”

“Well, then. I understand you grew up in Tennessee.”

“Knoxville, yes.”

“Then you and Skip Howard must be lifelong friends.”

He'd done his homework, all right. “The Howards lived next door to my best friend. That's the only reason I even knew who Skip was, back then.”

“Were you in library school together?”

“No. I didn't know Skip was a librarian, or even that he was here in Baltimore, until I came for my interview. We'd completely lost touch.” Vrai knew she owed her job to Skip, who'd been on the search committee.

Frank sipped his tea. “Well, then. Before we talk about your department, I was wondering if I might ask your help with a problem I'm having.”

“Of course.”

“It's Skip, actually.” Frank frowned into his tea. “Skip seems angry about something. Resentful. I don't want you to think I'm prying into his personal life. It's not my nature to pry. I'd like to suggest counseling to Skip, but I'm not sure how to go about it. I'd be grateful for any advice.”

The twenty-first century was less than a decade away. At his first staff meeting, Frank had promised to transform the library, prepare it for

the challenges of a new millennium. He had pounded on the podium like a preacher at a revival, saying over and over in evangelical tones, “I believe in transformation.” One thing Skip resented was Frank's determination to transform the reference collection — all of it — into a jukebox of CD-ROMs.

The tea was warming Vrai's cheeks. Would Frank think he'd embarrassed her again? But the more he talked, the redder his own cheeks became.

“I've had my own share of professional disappointments,” he said. “I used to be a history professor, a Napoleon scholar. You may have heard of the Napoleon Project. My plan was to develop a database of everything written by or about Napoleon and put it all on CD-ROM. But the head of my department and I didn't see eye to eye. Angelo Papanikolakis is his name. It was Angelo's unenlightened opinion that bibliography was not scholarship. Angelo saw to it that I was not awarded tenure. They say every man has his Waterloo. That, I'm afraid, was mine. Now Angelo Papanikolakis, a specialist in the history of ancient Greece, is head of the Napoleon Project, while I, well, I'm head of a library. At least I wasn't exiled to the South Atlantic. No, I was fortunate indeed. What more beautiful body of water is there than the Chesapeake Bay? Did you know that Napoleon's youngest brother lived in Baltimore for a time? Jerome was his name.”

Had Frank spiked his tea? His cheeks were scarlet, his forehead pink. With his napkin he dabbed at his mustache, his beard, his perspiring brow.

“At first,” he went on, “I admit, I resented having to change careers, but now I couldn't be happier. I'm earning more money already than that little Greek olive ever will. I'm determined to make a success of my new profession. I'm optimistic about the future of libraries. But Skip. I can't help wondering if he suffered some sort of disappointment, as I did, and needs help finding his way.”

“Nothing I'm aware of,” Vrai said.

“You think I'm asking you to rat on a friend.” Frank gave a slow nod. “I told you it wasn't my nature to pry, and what am I doing? I'm prying. Let me assure you that anything you say this afternoon will be held in strictest confidence. Ready for more tea?”

Frank refilled their cups from the white pot. “Sugar, yes?”

“Please.”

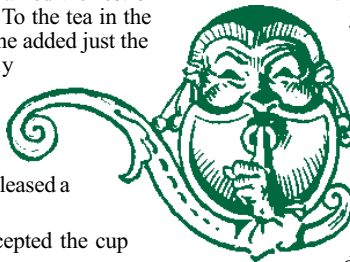
They sat and sipped.

“If you're willing,” he said, “tell me a little about Skip's family.”

She stuck to the facts. “There's just Skip's mother now. His father and sister are dead.”

“Did they die together? An automobile accident?”

She should never have mentioned Melody. For years now, Vrai had kept her promise to Skip. She'd never even told Bob how Melody died. “I think his sister died first.”



continued on insert page 2

“Had she been ill?”

Vrai sipped her tea. Was Frank testing her? Did he already know about Melody?

“Some sort of cancer?” Frank pressed.

She had to say something. To tell him Melody drowned would only invite more questions. “Nothing like that, no. She was always a little odd.”

“Odd?”

Vrai took a deep breath. “But then I hardly knew her. She was much younger.” She set the cup and saucer in her lap to stop the rattling. “Frankly, I’m a little uncomfortable talking about Skip’s family.” Did she really say ‘Frankly’? Skip’s favorite joke these days was to lower his voice, imitating Frank, and intone, “I’m Frank Leigh, my dear. I don’t give a damn.”

“The last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable.” Frank held her eyes with his steel gray ones. “I hear nothing but good things about the art history library. Rupert Brill sings your praises.” Dr. Brill was chair of the Art History department. His library had remained in Jordan Hall after the new library was built because he had insisted it must.

“Thank you.” Her mouth was dry. She lifted the cup, drank the rest of her tea.

“I imagine it must be difficult, at times, managing a library physically separate from the main library. Is there anything we can do here to make your job easier?”

Vrai seized the opportunity — who wouldn’t have? “I badly need an assistant, even part time.” It was a request she’d been making for years.

“Well, I’ll certainly look into it.” Frank stood up. The meeting was over. He took her empty teacup. Thanked her for coming. Asked her to keep their conversation in strictest confidence. Said he knew he could trust her.

For his annual Halloween party, Skip had used eyeliner and false eyelashes to turn the scar on top of his balding head into a pineal eye. “Sensitive to light in some reptiles,” he kept repeating, bowing deeply, giving each arriving guest a look at his third eye.

Skip and Gussie swore they hadn’t consulted about costumes ahead of time. Gussie had sewn two eyes on top of the hood of an orange bathrobe and come as a celestial goldfish. So called because, with its eyes on top of its head, the celestial goldfish is always gazing heavenward. The three Gussie kept in her underground office on the science floor of the library were named Dante, Virgil, and Beatrice.

Gussie’s son Justin was there, too, in his wheelchair. Vrai didn’t dare ask if his faded camouflage shirt was his costume. Had Justin come dressed as the disabled vet he actually was? She thought it insensitive for Skip and Gussie to go around showing off their extra eyes when Justin couldn’t see out of either of his. Surely Justin knew what his mother and his good friend Skip were up to, but there he sat in his wheelchair, smiling and talking as if he didn’t mind, so maybe he didn’t.

Vrai had been roped into coming. Literally. Earlier, in the lobby of Skip’s apartment building, she and three catalogers had tied themselves together, at the wrists, with lengths

against the grain people profile

Jill Coupe

Retired
1816 Sulgrave Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21209
<jill.coupe@att.net>

BORN & LIVED: Born in Spokane, WA; grew up in Knoxville, TN; have lived since 1981 in Baltimore, MD. Divorced, one son.

EDUCATION: BA Psychology, 1965, **College of William and Mary** (Phi Beta Kappa); MLS, 1975, **University of Maryland** (Beta Phi Mu); MFA in Fiction, 1988, **Warren Wilson College**.

FIRST JOB: First job was collating at my father’s printing plant in Knoxville.

As a librarian I worked at **The Environmental Fund**, Washington, DC; **George Mason University**; **Johns Hopkins University** (1981-1994); **ABC News, Washington Bureau**; **Enoch Pratt Free Library**.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Swim, read, write, and watch tennis.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Anything by **Muriel Spark**.

PET PEEVE: Well-meaning advice.

PHILOSOPHY: Travel light.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Promotion to Head of Reference, Eisenhower Library, **JHU**.

GOAL YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: In five years I hope to have a novel (or two) published.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I see the industry still buying books!! 🌱

of twine. There was great hilarity as each member of the string quartet was introduced to and shook hands with Justin.

Joan, Skip’s girlfriend, must have come straight from her law firm. Looked like all she’d had time to do was tie plastic pumpkins to her earrings.

The catalogers — Alice, Rachel, and Martina — were wondering how the string quartet was going to visit the punch bowl. Vrai’s attention was on a framed photo of a woman braiding a little girl’s hair. The girl was seated in a white wicker chair on a flagstone patio, her chin lowered, her eyes closed. Even in college, Melody had worn her pale blonde hair in braids. She’d always chirped when she talked and seemed a shade too happy, as if her brain manufactured natural Prozac. Melody had probably danced into the ocean at Venice Beach the day she died, the day she sent her parents a post card telling them not to worry, she was simply going to visit her friend Neptune. For the occasion, her thirtieth birthday, she’d chosen an aqua bathing suit with a white trident on it.

But the woman in the photo was Skip’s girlfriend, not his mother. So the girl must be Joan’s daughter, not Melody. Vrai raised her right hand in surprise, bringing Rachel’s left hand up with it, and Alice, the one whose idea the string quartet had been, the one with the scissors, severed the twine joining Vrai to Rachel.

“Hooray, how about some punch?” Vrai said, as if this had been her intention all along. She led the other three to the dining room table and ladled orange-colored vodka punch into four cups. Stacked on the dining room chairs were Skip’s party favors for his guests, white T-shirts proclaiming in bold blue letters, WE HAVE BEEN TRANSFORMED.

Alice and Martina, forced to coordinate sips of punch with the other two, were eyeing the guacamole. Vrai had to pee. Skip appeared, with a pair of kitchen shears. Could he read minds with that third eye of his?

Skip wouldn’t look at her. He hadn’t met her eyes all night. Snip, snip, snip went the shears. No more string quartet.

When Vrai came out of the bathroom, Skip was across the hall in the kitchen. He turned his back to her, opened a cabinet.

“Can I do anything to help?” she offered.

With the shears, he snipped off a corner from a bag of chips. “Congratulations. I hear you’re finally getting an assistant.”

Vrai stepped into the kitchen. “Look at me, Skip.”

Instead, he opened the top door of the refrigerator in her face. A quote in his handwriting was taped to the door at eye level. “Most men have found friendship a treacherous harbor.” Sophocles, in *Ajax*.

Skip made a lot of noise emptying a tray of ice cubes into a bowl. Then, “Lloyd’s never going to leave Marianne.”

Vrai slammed the freezer door shut. Her affair with Lloyd was none of Skip’s business. “Lloyd? What did he say to you?”

“Let’s see. I think he said, ‘That Vrai, she was always a little naive.’”

“You’re making that up. Why won’t you look at me? If you’ll just look me in the eye, Skip, I’ll tell you exactly what I said to Frank, which was exactly nothing.”

Skip picked up the bag of chips and the bowl of ice. On his way out of the kitchen, he bowed low, giving her a good long look with his third eye. 🌱