

Alexandria by Vince Gattton - excerpt from Scene 1

The interior of a small town library, somewhere in the Deep South. The shelves are metal, the carpet is industrial grade, the furniture stackable and plastic. Excavators would likely find evidence of renovations made during the Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton administrations, and not much in between or since.

There is a main check-out and information desk at center, the front door is off right, two computer workstations sit on a table down left, and there's an exit to stairs, offices, and a back door up left.

*Everywhere else: bookshelves. Somewhere there's a display shelf with Stephen King's *The Stand*, Justin Cronin's *The Passage*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, and maybe a few more books of that genre. The town is small, the library not well funded, but there are clear signs that the people who work there do their utmost to engage with the community they're in.*

It's Monday.

Brenda, the head librarian, is sitting at the main desk. She looks to be in her 50s, maybe a little older. She has a large, jagged scar on one side of her face. Ray, the other librarian, is somewhere in his 30s – 40s, and looks like a bespectacled hipster, or as close to a hipster as you can get in these parts. Ray has just finished trying unsuccessfully to get the busted internet connection working.

BRENDA

Hey, I thought of another obvious one for the display that we missed.

RAY

Me too. What's yours?

With a flourish, she produces a book to show him.

BRENDA

Children of Men.

RAY

Oh, yeah! And *Alas, Babylon*, which I had kind of forgot about.

BRENDA

Good one. Also (*pulling out another book*)... *Oryx and Crake*.

RAY

Ah! Wait – that's a series, though --

BRENDA

No, trilogy –

RAY

-- you said no *Left Behind* because no series –

BRENDA

It's a trilogy, we said trilogies were OK.

RAY

Yes, we did, didn't we.

BRENDA

No *Left Behind*, but you got to keep *The Passage*.

RAY

Right.

BRENDA

Which means you have to grant me my Margaret Atwood.

RAY

Done.

She adds these two books to the display, alongside The Stand, etc.

Hey, what time is it? I brought something.

He runs off the back way, then after a moment or two returns with a stack of three Tupperware containers.

Lunch. Lauren made us some lunch.

There's cold poached chicken on quinoa –

BRENDA

Quinoa?

RAY

Quinoa. *(off her look)* Come on now, we've done quinoa!

BRENDA

Hmmm.

RAY

We did, I promise – and an apple and fennel salad.

BRENDA

Mmmm.

RAY

And then there's a peach thing for dessert. It's all local, we got all the ingredients at the farmers' market on Saturday. Even the herbs.

BRENDA

Well!

RAY

You're gonna love it, guaranteed.

BRENDA

Well, if it's guaranteed...

RAY

What time's Pam coming?

BRENDA

Oh, we shouldn't wait on Pam.

RAY

It'll be nice, the three of us having lunch together.

BRENDA

That is nice, yes, that's a nice thought.

RAY

It's for her, too.

BRENDA

That's sweet of you, it's just Pam can't come today.

RAY

...Oh?

BRENDA

Yeah, she's running around today, lots to do.

RAY

W-- ... uh....wedding stuff?

BRENDA

...Uh, no, no. Well, not mostly. Just things. Some things.

RAY

Well.

Well, shoot. I brought lunch.

I made sure Lauren made three.

BRENDA

That's awful nice.

RAY

I wanted Pam to try this salad. See what she thought of it.

BRENDA

You just wanted to see her eat fennel.

RAY

I just want her to try it!

BRENDA

You want to see her make a face.

RAY

She can eat real food, you know. She might even like it.

BRENDA

She's not fancy, she likes her Hardee's.

RAY

Terrible.

BRENDA

I do, too.

RAY

I know, but you're persuadable.

BRENDA

I like everything, it's true. Pam's more discriminating.

RAY

It's disgusting.

BRENDA

It's consistent.

RAY

I will not rest.

BRENDA

Live to fight another day. I can take some home to her if you'd like.

Beat.

RAY

I sure did want the three of us to have lunch together.

BRENDA

Well, another day.

Beat.

RAY

Another day.

You hungry yet? We could serve it up right now.

BRENDA

Lemme at it.

Ray joins her behind the checkout desk, handing her one of the tupperwares and one of those packets of plastic cutlery and a napkin. They open their containers and Brenda pokes at it a little bit.

BRENDA

Quinoa, huh?

RAY

You liked it last time.

BRENDA

I don't remember that...

RAY

You did! We did quinoa already! I swear, you liked it!

BRENDA

I do not remember that. But I trust Lauren implicitly.

She tastes. She does, in fact, like it.

RAY

Good, right?

BRENDA

Very good, yes.

RAY

O ye of little faith.

PAM

(from offstage) BRENDA!

From the back way, Pam barrels in. She's a woman in her 40's, and wears her native Chicagoan attitude on her broad shoulders like combat gear. Ray jumps to his feet.

PAM

Hey --

RAY

Oh! Hey!

PAM

-- I need your car keys, I don't know where the fuck I put mine down, I swear to god me and those fucking keys I could punch myself in the fucking face. *(To Ray)* Hey.

Brenda pulls her purse from underneath and begins fishing around in it.

RAY

We were about to have lunch ---

PAM

She says he's somewhere between here and there or something, a friend of hers saw him and called her.

BRENDA

Did they talk to him? Where was he?

RAY

Can you sit for a minute and ---

PAM

A little. That piece of shit diner in Shawnee, god knows how he got that far. He doesn't have his phone, they had took it or broke it or something so that's why no answer or anything. But at least she knows he's in one piece.

BRENDA

Poor Tracey. How's she sound?

PAM

Howdaya think she sounds, she's a fucking mess. She's exhausted.

RAY

Lauren made --

PAM

He's headed right for us. I can probably just scoop him the hell up off the side of the road.

BRENDA

Better you than somebody else.

PAM

Damn right.

RAY

(a bit too loud) I BROUGHT LUNCH FOR YOU.

Beat.

Lauren made lunch.

Pam makes a pained grunting noise.

PAM

Nnnnggghhh! Nngh.

(Sighs.) Ah, that's nice. That's a nice thing.

RAY

Won't you sit for just a minute and join us?

PAM

I actually would, Ray. Believe it or not, that is actually a thing I would do.

But my friend's kid is in trouble. I gotta get on it.

BRENDA

Do you want to take it with you?

PAM

What is it?

RAY

Chicken, it's chicken.

...And quinoa.

...And an apple salad. With, with with...with fennel.

Beat.

BRENDA

It's good.

RAY

It really is, I swear.

Beat.

PAM

Yeah, no.

She grabs the keys from Brenda and heads for the door. She stops, turns back.

Tell Lauren I said thank you. That was very nice. It was a nice thing.

RAY

I will.

PAM

Rain check?

RAY

Rain check.

Pam nods.

PAM

I'm out.

And she's gone.

BRENDA

So. Just us then.

RAY

Just us.

They sit and eat.

BRENDA

That chicken's very tender.

They eat. After a moment:

RAY

So here's the thing.

I was really hoping to have this conversation with both of you today, for us to sit here and break bread together so to speak and really...I really did want to do this with you together, I didn't want to cut her, leave her out of it, but I do think I need to go ahead and just tell you, just say what I need to say even though Pam had to, had to go, and uh just get it out there and have it be done. So it's...it's...it is what it is and that'll be that and we'll...you know...

We can't come to your wedding.

I thought about making up an excuse or a conflict or something, just you know tactfully, regretfully decline because we'll be out of town or something but there's two things wrong with that and one is that, well, that's just lying and that's not right...and it's also being dishonest. Which I know, but they really are two different things: to make it a simple matter of schedule or something is to not be honest with you about where I'm at, where we're at, me and Lauren, and that feels wrong on its own terms. It would be the Presence of an Untruth, and the related-but-slightly-different Absence of a Truth. And it just feels like we owe you, I owe you, both of you but especially you, better than that. I owe you the truth.

You know how we feel about this.

We're Christ-followers, and that's something we live very deeply, that we take very seriously. Our love for Him, and His love for us, guides us in all we do. Everything. It all comes from love, the desire to live every day doing our best to know His will, and to grow in holiness so that we can be ever closer to Him and His overwhelming, life-giving love. And so I hope you understand where this is coming from, that there is nothing in my heart for you but love. For you and for Pam.

It doesn't come from a place of hate, and I know you know that but I need to say it. This is not about that. And I know you have, you both have I'm sure, really that all or most homosexuals have but you in particular I know that you have experienced a great deal of, or certainly *examples* of or a *pattern* of cruelty and unkindness and even violence and, and, and yeah "hate" is a completely fair word to use, *hate* at the hands of so-called Christians. And it is wrong, let me say that as clearly as I humanly can, it is unequivocally wrong and the way Christians in this country have treated our homosexual brothers and sisters is something that we as Christians need to repent of. We really do. And I do think that everything that's happened, you know, lately, in terms of this whole marriage debate has, has borne some good fruit, really, in terms of bringing us to a greater understanding of the ways in which we have failed. Not only failed, you know, *you*, you all, but also how we failed Jesus. How every act of cruelty toward homosexual persons is something that grieves Jesus's heart; we break the heart of our Lord when we fail our brothers and sisters in this way. And breaking Jesus's heart, that is clearly, 100% NOT what we want to do!

So it's not about that.

It's that, in being guided by Him, we believe that he wants the best for us, and that he has shown us what that means. That we are all broken, there's no question that we are, that I am, and no one's sin is any worse than anyone else's. But that sin *is a thing*. It's a real thing, and it does real harm. And that it is an act of love to help each other steer our broken selves away from that harm.

And more to the point, really my point, I don't mean to get into those weeds too much, is that *marriage* means something very specific to us, that it's designed by our Lord for a purpose, a specific and beautiful purpose. And that, while I understand fully the many, many good things that you and Pam bring to each other, and bring *out of* each other, what you'll be doing there is just not what I believe marriage to be. And to stand there, and participate in something that I believe to be an Untruth, and against what Jesus wants for us, and to, to, for the sake of our friendship and out of a desire to, I don't know, go along to get along or something, to not speak that Truth, is more than I can do.

But I want you to know that that is not a judgement, or *condemnation* of you, or of Pam, or of anybody. It's just about what I believe, and the dictates of my own conscience. And it really is about the marriage ceremony, about *marriage*, not about you and Pam, you and Pam are always welcome in our house, you are our friends, our beloved friends, and I hope that we can have you

over to dinner after, sometime soon, and that you won't think less of us because I promise you *we* do not think less of *you*.

You are very special to me, and our relationship is so important...but my relationship with the Lord is the most important in my life, even more than Lauren or the kids. That has to be my first consideration. And I just...I can't go where He bids me not to.

I do hope you can understand. I really do.

There is a long pause.

BRENDA

Well.

Ray.

I don't know quite what to say...

RAY

Yeah.

BRENDA

Because the thing is....you weren't invited.

Beat.

RAY

...?

BRENDA

Did you get an invitation?

RAY

...No. No, but I guess I thought you just...had a different way of doing things.

BRENDA

The Lesbian Invitation-Free Wedding? Yes, that's a standard thing that really exists, sure.

RAY

Or you were just late. Or something. We weren't *invited*?

BRENDA

It's just a handful of people, five or six. We're just doing a small thing here, Ray, we're too old for a big, fancy wedding. Not trying to rub anyone's nose in it, just a few close friends, a little family, that's it.

RAY

I'm not a close friend?

BRENDA

Ray, come on.

RAY

I thought I was.

BRENDA

You are, Ray. Of course you are. But, remember way back, about a minute ago? What you *just* said?

RAY

Well, yes...

BRENDA

At length?

RAY

...but it feels like I should have at least been *asked*.

BRENDA

You just said you wouldn't come!

RAY

Well, yeah! But it feels like that should have been my decision.

She looks at him for beat.

BRENDA

Hm. No. Not really. At all.

RAY

Yeah. OK, I guess not. It is your wedding.

BRENDA

Oh. Huh. Good point.

Beat.

RAY

Well, I feel foolish.

BRENDA

We all do a little bit, Ray. Goes with the territory.

Beat.

RAY

Come to dinner sometime anyway?

BRENDA

We will figure that out, yes.

Beat.

RAY

Is it because Pam doesn't like me?

BRENDA

What? That's nonsense.

RAY

No, she really doesn't like me. Why is that?

BRENDA

Oh, that's just her way...

RAY

That's not it. I try and try and she just does not like me. Come on, now.

BRENDA

Well, Ray. If you try real hard, if you really apply yourself, I bet you can come up with some fundamental differences in your outlooks on life. Maybe you might start there.

RAY

No, yes, I get that, yes, but that's...that shouldn't be a thing that... It really shouldn't. I mean, look at us. Why is it you and I can be friends, but she just can't? Why is that?

BRENDA

(Sighs.) Your blog upsets her.

RAY

Oh.

BRENDA

She reads it and I swear I wanna hide the dogs so they don't hear what comes out of her mouth.

RAY

Oh.

BRENDA

Yeah. You asked -- that's the god's-honest truth.

RAY

Well, that just makes me sad. That's not about her, it's not about you, it's about ideas. I mean, I believe what I believe; I think certain things are bad for our country, for our *body politic* if you will, and of course for our souls. But that's analysis, that's about big picture stuff, that's not about human beings on this earth being kind to one another and, and, and valuing each other.

BRENDA

I think she'd say that that big-picture stuff is all about human beings and valuing each other. Just in a different way.

RAY

But it's not personal.

BRENDA

It is to her.

Beat.

RAY

Well, I'm glad you don't take things that way. I'm thankful you can make the distinction.

BRENDA

Well...that's just because I don't read it.

RAY

Oh.

BRENDA

Oh, no, hon. I won't even let her read it to me. As long as I don't read it, I can't take it personally.

RAY

Oh.

BRENDA

That way we can stay friends.

RAY

But...but shouldn't we be better than that? Shouldn't we be able to understand each other, even our differences, and still be friends?

BRENDA

Well, sure. I guess. In theory.

But why make it harder than it has to be?

Beat. They eat together in silence.

RAY

You know, I really did struggle. About the wedding, I mean.

BRENDA

I do know, yes. And I'm sorry for that.

RAY

Thank you.

They eat.

BRENDA

Fennel, huh?

RAY

Yup.

BRENDA

Well, it's awful good.

Beat.

RAY

I'll tell Lauren you said so.

They eat in silence as the scene fades.