

All wet

By Julie C. Swierczek (with apologies to Raymond Chandler)

If I had to guess, I'd bet he had gold cuff links. Gold cuff links and a manicure. Navy blue blazer, perfectly starched collar. It's guys like that who come up with brilliant ideas like putting an HVAC unit on the roof of a library. He probably never sweat a day in his life – except maybe on the racquetball court, but who cares? In any case, the genius put it up there, not caring about who'd have to clean up the mess if it broke.

One too many freezes, one too many thaws, and a coil burst, sending thousands of gallons of water onto the roof. With nowhere to go, it just followed some old law. Gravity. Down through the stacks it poured, making a soggy mess of everything in its path.

That's how Wednesday started. February 13th, 2008.

The housekeeper was the first to discover the indoor showers happening throughout the building. From the roof, down through the third floor, the second, all the way to the electronic classroom on the first. That's what gravity does, when you aren't looking.

Trust me, I'm starting to get old enough to pay attention to gravity. I don't like it one bit.

We were lucky. It could have been much worse. Still, it wasn't pretty. The water mainly drained through four aisles of books, in an area about nine feet across. Some books got soaked.

This ain't like spilling your Starbucks on your newest beach novel. No, this is the kind of wet that hits a bibliophile in the solar plexus. The kind of wet where you can barely even open the cover on the rectangular pile of pulp that remains, so you can read the title of whatever it is that you now have to send to the great library in the sky.

We've got insurance for this sort of thing, but it still breaks your heart.

I'm a cataloger by trade. Usually I add books to the stacks. This time, I was the poor slob who read all those titles and sent those books for their last check-out – right into the dumpster.

Sure, they'll be more books – newer, better books – but it still gets you where it hurts.

Many people lent a hand that day. Facilities staff contained the spill, and got whatever it was on the roof to stop doing whatever it was doing.

I hope they kicked a few things while they were up there. Give the HVAC some pain. Let it know how it feels.

I hope someone at least took the time to emit the succulent raspberry in its general direction.

Librarians and student workers sorted through the mess. The books that still had a prayer were set out to dry. The ones that were goners, well, they came to me, and I put them out of their misery.

I have to say that our student employees did an impressive job that day. When I tip-toed through the

stacks to survey the damage, I noticed they were smiling and joking around, keeping their sense of humor in the midst of the mess. Nice to see, if you like that sort of thing. Then again, I've noticed that the students around here are good people.

Must be something in the water. Or just being this close to so much water.

As long as it ain't dripping through the stacks, anyway.

Our Collection Development librarian, Joan Bartram, had attended some training years ago on library catastrophes. She was in her element, putting her knowledge to work. Having her there saved a lot of heartache. It would have been a lot uglier without her there. Nobody knows water in libraries like Joan.

Maria Bernier, the University Archivist, also did a lot of the triage, because she knows about preserving materials too. It's good to have people like that around when you need them.

The real threat in wet libraries ain't the water, it's the mold. Book mold can eat an entire collection in a week. I've seen pictures. Green fuzz everywhere, like frosting on the birthday cake from hell.

You can prop open every book in the building to dry, but that doesn't solve everything. We had to bring in a disaster recovery team. They set up all sorts of drying equipment: fans, dehumidifiers, the works. They even turned the west wing of the third floor, which suffered the worst of the damage, into a giant drying room.

That's the best thing to do, because if we get mold – and we're keeping our fingers crossed here – it will be contained in one area.

Of course, that area contains almost one third of our entire collection. Everything from the Hs through the PQs. Almost the alphas through the omegas, as far as libraries go.

That's a royal pain in the backside, but our patrons can get those materials from the other HELIN libraries while we clean up the third floor. The HELIN libraries all pledged their support when they heard about the disaster.

I'm sure they were all breathing a sigh of relief that it was us and not them, but that's neither here nor there. I'd be feeling the same way if I weren't up to my eyeballs in wet ceiling tile stuck to piles of ruined books.

It will take a while to figure out the bottom line on the damage. For now, we're just hoping to save what we can and keep mold spores from finding a new home in the stacks.

I bet Mr. Wonderful never thought of that when he put that thing on the roof.