

## The Lost Library

Abigail fingered the wrinkled piece of paper in her pocket as she walked the unfamiliar streets. The feeling of the paper in her hand was still a novel experience. She had been shocked to see the note by the front door of her apartment this morning laying beside her sneakers, where it had landed when someone had shoved it under the night before. The message was from her aunt—her mother’s aunt, really—and Abigail was not surprised that the ancient woman still used paper and pen to communicate.

The streets Abigail walked on were deserted, but that was nothing unusual. She could see the blue glow of screens in every window she passed. Abigail rarely had a need to leave her apartment, just like the rest of the population of her city and most others. She, and everyone else she knew, lived their lives almost completely virtually and that was the way they liked it.

She pulled the now wrinkled note from her pocket and squinted at the address. This was the place. Abigail peered up at the building in front of her. It was remarkable only in its complete lack of remarkability. The squat but sturdy structure was old but well maintained, the bricks worn but still holding tight. The windows were outfitted with bright blue flower boxes that currently stood empty. Abigail pushed open the heavy front door and stepped into the dim interior. The room she stood in contained exactly one wooden desk, two wingback chairs, and a faded but still lovely oriental rug. Her aunt was nowhere to be found.

“Auntie?” Abigail called out, feeling foolish. Clearly her aunt was not here unless she was about to pop out from under the desk. And yet, Abigail found herself peering over the

cumbersome piece of furniture as though she was expecting just that to happen when a door at the back of the room opened, and her aunt walked through.

“Abby!” her aunt cooed as she shuffled toward where Abigail stood open-mouthed in the middle of the room. Now that her aunt was through it, Abigail could see where the small brass doorknob jutted out from the wall, but before she had not noticed it at all. The rest of the door fit seamlessly back into the wall and had all but disappeared.

“Auntie, so nice to see you.”

The old woman wrapped her arms around Abigail and squeezed tighter than should have been possible for someone of her size and frailty. It had been a long time since Abigail had been hugged so thoroughly, and she sighed with pleasure. Her aunt smelled like buttermilk and strong black tea, smells that Abigail had somehow forgotten.

“You came,” her aunt said, pulling back to inspect her. She gave a grim smile and patted Abigail’s arm. “Come with me. We don’t have a lot of time.”

Abigail opened her mouth to ask what exactly they had to do and where they were going, but her aunt was already heading back toward the hidden door, her step full of purpose and determination. Abigail followed through the door and down a dim staircase. Her aunt took the stairs slowly, and Abigail stepped obediently behind her, worrying that the older woman may slip and fall.

“Auntie, where...” the words faded from Abigail’s mouth as the women reached the bottom of the stairs. She looked slowly around the cavernous room they now stood in as her aunt grinned next to her. “Auntie, what is this?” she breathed finally.

“The library.”

“The library?” The word sounded foreign to Abigail’s ears. She, of course, knew what a library was, it had just been so long since she’d heard of one, and she had certainly never stood in the middle of one. She started down the first aisle, running her hand over book after dusty book. There must have been thousands. She didn’t dare speak, as though she might disturb the stories that rested silently on the shelves, waiting. She walked the aisles one by one, weaving through her aunt’s staggering collection. Books. Paper books. Abigail pulled one off the shelf and let the pages flip open like wings. She held her thumb on the edge and let the paper run across it, listening to the quiet fluttering. And since no one was looking, Abigail lifted the book to her face, stuck her nose in the middle of it and breathed deep. Another smell she had forgotten.

She was smiling by the time she meandered back to where her aunt had positioned herself in a worn leather chair near the stacks. As a child, Abigail had always felt that her aunt had a touch of magic about her, but now she was sure of it. It had been on her auntie’s worn rug in front of her sooty fireplace that Abigail had poured over book after book for hours while her parents were at work. And now here they were. Like old friends, the books were all here.

From somewhere a cat had appeared and taken up residence on her aunt’s lap. “So you like it?” she asked, smiling slyly up at Abigail.

“It’s amazing,” Abigail answered truthfully, “but what are you going to do with it?”

“Give it to you.” Her aunt stroked the cat between its ears.

“Give it to me? And what am I going to do with it?” Abigail cradled the book she had grabbed off the shelf to her chest, unable to imagine what she would do with this treasure trove, this underground miracle she hadn’t known existed but now couldn’t imagine living without. Her aunt shrugged her small shoulders and slowly rose from her seat. Abigail followed her stooped

form back up the stairs, looking over her shoulder several times as though to make sure it hadn't all been a dream.

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Abigail dusted the big wooden desk for the third time since arriving this morning. Ernest the cat circled her legs, and she reached down to scratch his head. She sighed to no one in particular, looking around the empty room that had only recently become so familiar to her.

She had added a few more chairs and small tables to the space in the weeks since she had first come here. The hidden door was now wide open with a sign warning people to watch their step. Another larger sign hung outside the front door, making the building suddenly something to remark about. She had posted about this place—about what it was and who should come—everywhere she could think of. Abigail didn't know if anyone else would feel the pull of this place the way she had; if anyone else would follow the phantom memories of a heavy book in their laps to her doorstep. But she had to at least try.

“Well, Ernest, this may have been a terrible idea.” Ernest did not reply, mostly because he was a cat and partly because he wasn't very chatty.

She was considering packing up and leaving for the day when the small bell she had installed over the door tinkled, and a frazzled looking woman stepped into the room. A little girl clutched her hand. Abigail glanced up in surprise, and her eyes widened further at the crowd she saw peering around the woman into the newly dust-free interior.

“We came for a book,” the woman said timidly, afraid she had come to the wrong place. A smile broke out across Abigail's face.

“Yes. Come in. The library's open.”