

Sanctuary

The boy was three when he first visited the library. He sat on his mother's lap in a circle and watched a woman wearing a lei read *Where the Wild Things Are*. He leaned forward, a sparkle in his big round eyes. His mother beamed at him. She was beautiful, albeit tired-looking from the boy's lack of a sleep schedule.

The boy was eleven when he started to read long books for himself. He tore through novels at speeds that made his mother smile. She was always willing to drive him back, a pile of books to return in his lap, knees bouncing with excitement at the prospect of more books. She was even more willing to give him recommendations. It was around that time that she gave him her favorite spot: an old, exhausted-looking beanbag in the corner of the library. He loved to curl up on it and lose himself in the adventures of some mythic hero. He would never admit it, but he always saw himself as the protagonist in books he read.

The boy was fourteen when he lost interest. Other things became more important; his special spot was forgotten. The magic had faded. He threw himself into high school, making friends and playing every sport he could. When he did visit the library, it was because his mother forced him to. He sat at the computer playing video games while his mother and little sister sat in the story time circle, the rug now far more faded than it had been when he was in his sister's place. He managed to glance up from his game and saw his mother smiling at him. She was still beautiful, though tiredness crept into her eyes and her long hair was woven with gray. He turned back to his game.

The boy was seventeen when he reluctantly dragged himself into the library to seek out a book he needed for school. *War and Peace*. He had almost reached it when something caught his eye: the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, sitting unassumingly on a shelf. As if in a trance, he grabbed the first, and settled back into his spot. It was as if no time had passed at all since the long forgotten days when he would beg to go to the library. When he finally looked up, it was hours later. His mother would be worried about him. He snatched *War and Peace* off the shelf, but he also grabbed *The Fellowship of the Ring*. And *The Two Towers*. Just in case. He came back the next week, having ripped through the two books he had borrowed. He had returned, and almost constantly inhabited his special spot after school.

He only brought one girl to the library.

He had known her a few weeks when something came over him, and he asked her to the library on a quiet Saturday. They sat comfortably together, reading, for hours. When he put his arm around her, whispering something in her ear, she simply shushed him, smiled, and leaned her head onto his shoulder without looking up from her book. She handled the book with such love and care, as if it were a precious heirloom. The boy knew at that moment she was the one.

The boy grew up. He completed college in his hometown. He married the girl. No one, not even him, was quite sure when it happened, but suddenly he was a man, and when he left the house his mother cried. The tears dripped down her still-beautiful face, over her emerging wrinkles and off her cheeks, as she watched her son drive away from home. She managed to smile and wave. He watched her in the rearview mirror, a single tear dripping onto his own

cheek, and waved back to his beautiful mother. He looked over at his wife, reading a book in the front seat, and she smiled, as though she could sense him looking at her. They turned the corner, moving on to their life together.

The man was newly turned thirty-five when he was dragged back to his hometown. On the drive in, his wife held his hand. Her face was not in a book, but instead turned to her husband's grief-filled face, her eyes filled with worry. Their two children, a boy and a girl, sat silently in the backseat. Their lives had been uprooted within the short space of a month. They were now moving to this unfamiliar place, where they only visited sometimes to see their grandmother.

The man pulled into the driveway of the familiar home. His sister was waiting outside, her features pulled into a mask of anxiety and grief. She had never left their hometown. She greeted her brother with a hug and some worried words. He walked urgently into the house, and standing there was his beautiful mother. He couldn't contain himself. He ran into her arms, sobbing helplessly. She was still beautiful, even with her hair falling out and her skin hanging off of her skeletal figure. She was still beautiful, smiling and crying and holding her little boy in her arms. She remembered the toddler with shining eyes, the child with endless curiosity, the reclusive teen, the adventurous young man. She saw them all at that moment. The years of love the son and mother held for each other floated between them and connected them. They held each other and cried.

With firm resolve, the man returned for the first time in years to his library. His wife sat with his daughter in her lap on the now-dilapidated storytime rug. The girl smiled and clapped her hands with joy, and her mother looked at her with pride. His son excitedly dove into the pages of *Harry Potter*. But the man barely saw his family. He read and read. He read books on cancer, chemotherapy, even homeopathic treatments. He was determined to keep his beautiful mother with him.

The man was thirty-five-and-a-half when he visited the library again. This time he was alone. It was late at night. He had just kissed his mother goodbye forever. He wandered into the library. He walked, blind and deaf to everything around him. Somehow, he found his way to the storytime rug. He sat down heavily and sobbed, a heartbreaking, desolate sound. Others were near him, staring, but he felt entirely alone. His heart and soul flowed out of him. His efforts had been useless. His mother was gone. She had been beautiful even in her final moments, lying small and helpless on her hospital bed. She looked up at her family. Her final expression was of peace and joy. The man remained sobbing on the rug for a while. He sat there, hollow, for a few more minutes, then drove home.

The man was thirty-seven when his wife convinced him to return to the library with his family. He sat in his spot, staring between his knees at the carpeted floor beneath him, trying to contain the tears that still lingered all this time later. But then a sound drew him out of his tight, painful position. Laughter. He looked up. His wife was poking his daughter gently in the stomach, having just read a silly story to her. His son sat nearby, pretending to be annoyed, but really fighting a grin at his mother and sister's ridiculous behavior. The man felt a small smile

slide onto his face. With one swift movement, he stood up, walked to his family, and swept his son and daughter into his arms. Exasperated cries of “Dad!” ensued, but the kids giggled gleefully as they tried to escape. His wife was surprised at his behavior initially, but upon seeing his face, she smiled, made an exaggerated shushing noise, and proceeded to poke both of the children’s stomachs, until the whole family was a loudly laughing mess.

It is many years later, and the man is seventy-seven, a grandfather, when he makes his final appearance at the library. He sits with his arm around his wife. Her hair has gone all gray, but she is still beautiful. He leans down to whisper into her ear, but without even looking up from her book, she smiles, shushes him, and leans her head onto his tired shoulder. He looks around, and sees all the joy surrounding him. The storytime rug, replaced many times since when he was young, sits a few feet away, vibrant and full of excited children and adoring parents. He sees his spot, now filled with a new boy and a new beanbag. He looks over at the computers and sees a grumpy-looking teen perched at one, fidgeting with a Rubik’s cube. *He’ll learn*, the old man thinks. He had learned much himself. His life had been intertwined with the old red brick building. It had seen him through love and loss, laughter and heartache. Yes, all of his best, most important moments—they happened at the library.