

The Girl in the Library
1st Place Stuckey Contest Winner
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There was once a little girl, four days away from six, with mousy brown hair, thin-pressed lips, and a worried crease to her brow. She was very shy. She cowered at the slightest whisper of social contact, a stranger's smile sending her scurrying behind the fortress of her mother's legs, pale face peeking around the folds of fabric like the moon at the edge of an eclipse. Her dark eyes always seemed to be trained toward the floor, and she often counted the cracks in the sidewalk or the chips of dried plaster, imagining miniature armies fording the rivers of fissures and scaling the ridges of folds, aliens in a foreign land. Her hands shook when she was forced to speak; her voice thin like the edge of a blade.

The little girl, being as shy as she was, was also very lonely. When one tends not to speak, it is sometimes off-putting to those who approach them, thinking that the individual is uninterested or angry or perhaps even stupid, so they tend to draw away as well. The little girl experienced this occurrence firsthand, her own reticence extinguishing the chance of potential friendships or common solidarity. She shied away from even the slightest extensions of kindness, believing them to be traps. She let others tell her what to do, how to act, and what to wear. Though young, she understood the power of perception, so she learned to blend into the walls and corners like a chameleon, inconspicuous, invisible. The chocolate started to melt away in her eyes. It seemed that she would always remain static, a minor character in someone else's story.

Then, one day, she discovered the library.

When the little girl first entered the literary citadel, she was amazed by the sheer enormity of it, the white walls and russet shelves stretching out before her like an ocean, melding together – a mural of rectangular strips that rivaled that of an Aztec mosaic. They were absolutely filled with books: tomes and idols in the church of prose. Stories upon stories. Tales of old, tales of woe. Dragons and knights, war and blood, courage and power. They called to her. Discover, they said. Open our pages and see.

She was allowed to check out three. The selection process seemed to take hours, her towering stack of preliminary selections dwindling, falling victim to the scythe of limitation. The little girl's mind raced as she calculated subject matter and length, genre and summary, reputation and acclaim. It was with great trepidation that she timidly approached the librarian's desk, sneakers squeaking, setting down the triad on the counter like they were precious jewels, strengthened and tempered by the fire of inquisitive minds. She checked out the worthy three, and took them home, where they were promptly read before the next day.

She begged her mother to take her back.

Tomorrow, she said, smiling.

Tomorrow came, and the little girl went again. The cycle repeated, over and over, chapter after chapter, book after book, their words a mantra echoing in the little girl's head.

Before she knew it, she had fallen in love.

She loved the way the bell rang over her head as she stepped in the sagging doorway – a million metallic pinpricks of sound. She loved the mottled aroma that hit her nose, the scent of old pages and wrinkled words. She loved the way the varnished wooden bookcases seemed to slump in toward her, spines curved like a wise old sage, shielding her from the outside world with their defined angles and arching curves. She loved the orderly disorder, the overflowing shelves, not quite alphabetized. She loved the way the dust sifted through the air in a mist, and how the silence seemed to have a sound after all, an endless stream of “*Eureka!*—I have found it!”

The library was her solace, her balance. She longed to get lost in it, rushing hurriedly past the children's reading circle and humming computer lab, unsteady magazine racks and dingy restrooms, straight to the aisles full of myth and novelty and fable. Arms outstretched, she would run both her hands across multicolored spines, fingertips skimming mildewed paperbacks and worn hardcovers, ragged pamphlets and leather-bound volumes engraved in gold, a trail of disturbed dust in her wake. She would pull books out at random and then sit and read, her back pressed up against the shelf, flipping through pages smudged with ink and fingerprints. At times, she would feel saltwater lap at her feet, or a warm blanket across her shoulders or even a battle's metallic crescendo in her ears. She would ponder the cramped, erudite notes that appeared in narrow margins, feeling a connection to someone who was just like her. For the first time in a long time, she did not feel alone.

And so she read.

She read of brave knights and large castles and a man named Ismael. She read of a raft floating down the muddy Mississippi and a ball of twine in a hollowed knothole, of the four sisters March and a red hunting hat. She read of an aging portrait and a rabbit farm and the boy with the lightening scar.

And as she read, she learned.

She learned that it is okay to be broken. She learned that there was no shame in being different, how intricacies make us interesting and enigmatic, like asymmetry in a painting. She learned that no one should judge her based on the content of her closet but of her character. She learned that while her imperfections were a part of her, they did not define her. She learned that we are all the same under the skin, heart and flesh and blood and bone, the common bond of humanity tying the universe together with starlight thread.

And as she learned, she blossomed.

She had to be brave, because Joan was brave. She had to be confident, because Pippi was confident. She had to be strong, because Jane was strong. She began to come out of the shell that she had so carefully built around herself, the walls behind her eyes taken down brick by brick,

book by book. She began to hold her head up and smile at strangers and only blushed when they smiled back.

She tentatively ventured into the reading circle, first just standing on the outer edges, inching closer and closer as the chapters went on, finally daring to sit down on the purple star closest to the window. She met a nice boy named Ben. She liked dragons, and he liked dragons too. They became great friends. He tried to hold her hand once, and then decided he liked the little girl much better as a reading partner than as a paramour. She started to speak, her voice becoming straight and firm like the spines of her books. Her eyes studied expressions and emotions instead of sidewalk cracks. The only thing she hid behind was a blanket, the gleam of her book-light peeking around the edges of fabric like glowing cat eyes.

Today, the girl is the protagonist in her own story. She has the same mousy brown hair and dark chocolate eyes, bits of her still stuck in transition. She's outgoing, decisive, and not afraid to take risks. She delivers speeches, sings in choir, and dances in school skits and routines. Her hands don't shake anymore. But not everything has changed. She still gets taken in by the stories of brave adventurers and noble sacrifices and princesses who are perfectly capable of doing the saving, sometimes getting chastised after her favorite story is discovered tucked in front of what should be her geography textbook. She still ventures into the darkest corners of bookshelves, practiced hands finding the most obscure copies, getting lost in the different combinations of the same twenty-six letters. She's distracted, forgetful, and a little eccentric.

She is not perfect, but what heroine is?