

## An Elegy for Headquarters

It's funny—I thought I would be the only one taking pictures. But there they were, my fellow photographers: an old man aiming his battered Blackberry at the staircase; a mother posing with her child by the self-checkout kiosk; the librarians snapping discreet photos of the reference desk. I wondered if they saw me tiptoeing through the shelves with my phone raised—or if they were too focused on preserving their own memories to notice.

Once I'd taken my pictures, I drifted towards my favorite armchair to watch the evening's last dregs of activity. The mother guided her sniffling toddler towards the bathrooms. The old man shuffled toward the exit, shaking his head. The librarians huddled by the reference desk, rubbing their eyes. From my seat in the corner, I heard the clicking of the cracked white clock across the room. How many years had I marked library time by its two hands? How many evenings had I hoped for a little more time before closing?

Collectively, the librarians stooped towards the intercom's microphone. For a moment, the speakers popped with static, and then—

*"It's four fifty-five. Headquarters closes in five minutes."*

It was the last day of my library's life.

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"Headquarters" was my library's official nickname in the St. Louis County Library system. This vaguely ominous title does Headquarters little justice; my library was a comfortable place, a sturdy building of warm pinkish brick with thick glass windows and green walls. I always thought of Headquarters—built in 1959—as my older aunt: tidy, welcoming, sleepy on Sundays. I first visited her when I was three, and when I discovered that I could take books home—for free, as many as I could fit in a bag!—I was hooked.

Headquarters quickly became a constant in my life. In the summer, I'd scramble out of the car and rush inside, the asphalt of the library parking lot scorching my flip-flops; in winter, I'd edge my way up the icy steps, library card gripped in one mittened hand. I marked the beginning of each visit with a deep breath through my nose; Headquarters always smelled clean and slightly sweet, like the warm almond scent that lifted from the pages of her older novels. The more afternoons I spent at Headquarters, wandering through her mazes of shelves, nestled in her faded armchairs, the more my love for reading grew.

I lost myself in fantastical worlds—Redwall, Hogwarts, Earthsea, Narnia—with the help of her juvenile fiction section. I cut my artistic teeth on her shelves of craft books and graphic novels. And I explored a smorgasbord of interests—mythology, typefaces, brain phenomena—by navigating her crammed non-fiction stacks. My tote bag was always full of books. Library receipts accumulated on my desk. I read at lunch, at recess, and in the bathtub. By third grade, I'd developed irreversibly into a bookworm—and Headquarters was my home base. Whether I sought inspiration, entertainment, or simply an hour of peace and quiet, she waited with open arms.

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I wanted to help Headquarters however I could. So, when I was thirteen, I applied to volunteer.

Orientation began in Conference Room 3. I'd never been in any of the conference rooms before—I hadn't even walked down the hallway where they were located. *I wonder how much of the library I haven't seen*, I thought, pausing in front of the conference room's heavy double-doors. As I prepared to enter, my stomach gurgled. *Was that from adrenaline? Am I really nervous about this? Or am I just hungry?*

The door creaked open. Fifteen students swiveled in their seats to look at me. Each one had a folder in their lap and a nametag plastered to their shirt. I smiled, but my face burned; quickly, I retreated to a chair at the corner of the room. Quiet chatter resumed. Behind me, students continued trickling in,

finding seats, rifling through their folders; I filled out my nametag and read through the folder's code of conduct. I'd just gotten to the dress code—*no t-shirts, no running shorts, no heeled shoes*—when the door squeaked open again.

It was the librarian.

Jess was petite and friendly, with warm brown eyes that sparkled when she talked about library duties. She led us through the shelves, down the stacks, and up the stairs to the archives, rattling off critical information all the while. *CDs are sorted alphabetically. Periodicals are sorted by date, with the newest on the top—but patrons can't check out the most recent issue, just read it here. Oh, when you're shelving DVDs, remember there's a different section for kids' TV. Also, make sure you're not shelving documentaries with feature films. Here's the romance paperbacks—you guys aren't allowed to shelve these, so don't worry about them. Check the label for Mystery or Fiction, because we have a separate mystery section. Westerns are in the stacks. Biographies are in the stacks. Audiobooks are by the armchairs. Here's where you guys will go to load up your carts. Here's where you go to sign in. Any questions?*

By the time orientation was over, my head was spinning. Apparently, my layman's knowledge of Headquarters' organization, though sufficient for an enthusiastic library patron, would not be enough for an official library volunteer. I had much more to learn about the library I loved.

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As a new volunteer, I was overwhelmed and clumsy: I fumbled with my badge, accidentally picked the squeakiest carts, and shelved non-fiction at a sloth's pace as I adjusted to the Dewey Decimal system. I'd apologize awkwardly to patrons when I wasn't sure how to assist them. But Headquarters watched patiently. Gradually, my efficiency increased, my duties expanded—and I, too, began to grow. Volunteering helped me evolve from an anxious, quiet, book-loving middle-schooler into a confident, relaxed, book-loving highschooler.

I helped patrons find something they were genuinely interested in—gardening books, large-print westerns, Batman DVDs—and discovered their excitement was contagious. When families came in to check out bags of books, it made my day. And each time I flipped through a child’s scribbled-over reading log, watching them beam with pride, I felt a surge of optimism. I was comforted, too, by the steady trickle of familiar faces: the German tutor with the leather jacket; the women who did 1000-piece puzzles on Sundays; the gaggle of old men with their newspapers and John Grisham novels. Each day, Headquarters teemed with quiet, harmonious activity. Every afternoon I spent there was uplifting.

Then I saw the notice.

When the pandemic hit, I couldn’t visit Headquarters for nearly eight months. It was even longer—at the end of my junior year—when volunteers were allowed back. I wanted desperately to make up for lost time. I’d been picturing myself returning to the summer reading desk in June, spending my July afternoons shelving books, popping in on weekends to organize DVDs during my senior year.

But the notice changed everything.

It was pinned to the bulletin board by the women’s restrooms, a bright sheet of neon-green cardstock. “ATTENTION, PATRONS!” it proclaimed. “HEADQUARTERS WILL BE CLOSING FOR CONSTRUCTION ON MAY 28, 2022.” Smaller print beneath declared that Headquarters would be demolished and rebuilt under a different name.

*Demolished?! I thought. But it’s already April!*

Staring at the sign, half-disbelieving, my stomach roiled. *They’re tearing down my library.*

Suddenly, Headquarters only had a month left.

After that, visits to Headquarters filled me with grief rather than hope. As May stretched on, the life faded from my library. Shelves were rearranged; books were carted out; even patrons relocated to different branches. One day, when I came in for a shift, the sign-in binder wasn’t there. Chris, a librarian I’d known for ten years, was managing the circulation desk; I asked him where the binder was.

He smiled, but it was tired, apologetic. “We close next week. There’s nothing else for volunteers to do.”

Seven days later, it was the 28th. I walked slowly through what remained of Headquarters, taking photos to ensure nothing was forgotten. I curled up in one of her armchairs for the final time. I checked out one last book. And I stayed until five, when she closed for good.

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I miss my library. I’ve tried not to drive past the lot where she used to be, but I’ve seen empty wooden shelves stacked on the pavement, dumpsters loaded with shards of glass and shredded green carpet. This essay is a construction for Headquarters, assembled out of memory rather than pink brick. As long as I’m responsible with its file, I know it will last.

Headquarters, I believe in the importance of books—to delight, to inspire, to challenge—because you showed me how powerful they are. I believe in the importance of exploration because you fostered my love of learning. And I strive to be as welcoming, generous, and understanding with others as you were with me, because that’s how you built a community. Headquarters, I am a better person because of you.

I love you. I miss you. I’m grateful for everything.