

The Library

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About 1,500 words

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A good many years ago, my older brother Conrad used to bring me to the library. Every other Thursday, without fail, we would climb these concrete steps to the old building in the center of town and enter a world of enchantment and wonder—a world full of books. The façade of wood and stone beckoned me and I always got a pitter patter in my heart as we approached the glass double doors that opened to the second floor—the library’s section for adults. Upon entrance, and to my great despair, I would be relegated to the kiddie library accessed by a steep stairwell in the back corner of the room.

The walls of the children’s area were painted bright yellow, and decorated with happy, smiling pictures of Winnie the Pooh, The Cat in the Hat and other characters of supposed interest to me. I would hurry as fast as I could, picking the limit of five books that drew me in by their look or what I might read if I opened to a random page in the story. I would check out as fast as the clerk could stamp the cards, then I’d climb hollow, wooden steps back to the place of my real fascination and joy.

I’d often set my pick of children’s books on the counter where Mrs. Marley, the head librarian, would look over the top of her glasses and nod an ‘ok’ to my taking up her counter space. Her glasses chain was made of gold and pearls that twinkled in the light when she moved her head. I always thought she must be rich. How could working at the library—and being head librarian, at that—*not* be a job that made you rich? Mrs. Marley didn’t often smile, but when she did it was warm and genuine, and filled you with the notion she must be the kindest and smartest lady in the world.

I never knew where Conrad was going to be when I came upstairs. Each floor-to-ceiling shelf held a different subject and my brother Conrad cherished and read them all.

On one particular day, I found him in the Biography section, perusing something with a beautiful, dark-haired woman on the front. Conrad asked, as he always did, if I’d picked my books, and I told him all about them in a bicycle-going-down-a-hill-without-brakes sort of way. He listened to every word with interest, his blue eyes shining behind the thick, dark-rimmed glasses he wore. I asked him if he was ready to go. I filled with glee when he said, with a gentle smile, that he hadn’t *quite* made all of his selections. I whooped and clapped my hands together, heading off into the enticing world of strangers’ dreams on paper.

I adored *everything* about the adult library; I loved the way my Buster Brown shoes sounded on the dark wood floors, and how that sound would echo throughout the quiet of the large space. I loved the smooth, shiny wood of the card catalog, and the feeling of those metal drawer pulls in my fingers. I walked through the aisles, lightly brushing the books in my reach with my outstretched fingers, pondering the mysteries held in each lush manuscript I touched.

The shelves were labeled with words like *Fiction: A – F* or *Poetry* or *Reference*, but I always saved the best and most wonderful place for last. I had been down it a hundred times, this aisle with no name, sitting farthest from the windows. The space seemed forever darker, colder and less welcoming, but in my mind, it held a special and powerful magic.

I stood at the entrance of this charmed realm, screwing up my courage, then passing over the invisible threshold. The silence there was dreadful and exciting all at the same time. Large parchments, ones I could only dream were so big they had to be laid out on the study tables in the front to be viewed, were rolled and tucked above books whose gilded titles had worn off long ago. My mind would cry, in its childish way, *Oh Mystery of Mysteries! What secrets you must hold!*

On this day the ramshackle organization was no different, but as I walked to the middle of the row, the farthest end seemed darker than usual. I think I might have shuddered too—I don't know if it was colder than usual, but there was something weird in the energy of the space. Like the feeling older people described as someone walking over your grave. I tried to ignore it. My mind had the tendency to make something out of nothing, so I shrugged off the dread and continued, going farther and farther into the shadows.

My attention was caught by a thin, red book on the top shelf. There was no title printed on the spine, so I don't know why it caught my attention. Maybe it was the bright color, contrasting against the shabby brown and gray covers of the books surrounding it. I stood up on my tip toes, but my finger could hardly reach the bottom of the book. I stretched my arm, and was almost able to grab the bottom of the book with my fingertip, when I heard a whooshing sound on my left, like a breeze blowing through except nothing moved. Before my feet went flat on the floor, a fast, dark movement came toward me, and I saw only a tall and seemingly bottomless shadow before everything went black.

I floated in and out of a waking dream, finally coming around when I heard Conrad calling my name; calmly at first, then in panic. He came to the last aisle with Mrs. Marley and her glittering chain dangling from her glasses. There was a moment of relief as I was sure Conrad would be able to save me. I tried to call out, but whatever this darkness was that had me in its clutches was hiding me, taking my voice, and keeping me from reaching out to the safety of my brother. I saw Conrad press his hands to the sides of his head and he yelled something that sounded like it was coming from far away. My surroundings swirled together, all gray and black and nothingness, and then everything, including Conrad, was gone.

That day was 29 years ago. I still don't know much about my captor, other than he is a lonely blackness that never ends and I am trapped inside him. Time passes strangely here in the the shadow. I figure I am still the same as I was back then. I look at my hands and legs and they don't seem to have grown, but my mind has gotten older—a grown-up mind trapped in a child's body that's trapped in The Darkness.

Starting early on in my captivity, The Darkness allowed me to browse the whole library when it was dark outside. I found I could touch the books and know fully what was contained inside, even without reading them. I still peruse the shelves every night, consuming the new books and revisiting old favorites. I've learned a lot here in the library, yet there is still so much I will never know.

During the day, The Darkness lets me come up to the surface and walk the wooden floor of this aisle that brought me to him. When someone is here, I pass right through their bodies and they almost never notice. Some, however, shake like a feather has been grazed up their back, then scurry off in a fright. I've heard the word "ghost" before from far away, and "little girl who disappeared", and I suppose they are talking about me.

I saw my beloved brother Conrad again. I don't know how long it had been since my capture that he'd returned, but I felt his presence before seeing him. I was waiting in the shadows at the far end of the aisle when he stepped into the narrow passage between the two shelves full of randomly placed books, loosely bound manuscripts and rolled up papers that need a whole study table to be unfurled. I knew he couldn't hear me, nor feel me touch his shoulder as he cried, but I had learned a trick and The Darkness allowed me to try it with Conrad.

Using all my concentration and might, I threw a book from the shelf, causing it to land with a hard slam next to Conrad's foot. He jumped at the sound and was astonished when he saw the book laying open on the floor beside him. I used the rest of my energy to turn the pages and stopped at a picture of a little blond haired boy and girl picking happy, white flowers and putting them in a basket. There was a gray, two-story house in the distance, shaded by a huge maple with sun-glintered leaves, just like our climbing tree at home. Conrad picked up the book. His mouth dropped open and his hand covered the bottom half of his face when he read the picture's caption, written underneath in big, block print:

BROTHER AND SISTER FOREVER.