

Library

by Lydia Copeland

Let's start from the beginning. Your mother's face in the phone. Your parted lips. Your surprised tongue. Hands deep in the folds of your skirt. The poet filling your pockets with blue and orange. The poet filling your notebooks with slowly drifting fields and gramophones and the white air of winter. His hands down the neck of your shirt. Writing in libraries about pets, about the cat with the black-tipped paws. The dog's sugar tooth. Yellowed paragraphs and the damp buildings behind the oak trees. Words endlessly mouthing. Falling asleep in the carrels. You told everyone thank you, even the front doors. You made it impossible to say no.

Someone hired you. You hid in their bathroom on your lunch break pretending to be pregnant in the mirror. It was winter then and the steam from the radiator whitened the windows. Your hands smelled like rose soap and cigarettes. You brushed your hair. Long careful strokes. You tightened your lips. You looked at your body. The thin arms, the blue veins, like cast lines in your neck. You took it all in. And then he was gone. There was no time to think, no time to sift through the letters beneath the mattress, no time to lick the smell from the air.

So you worked late nights with the older, unkempt librarians. You listened to them talk about their houses in the garden district of town, of female wrestlers and the beautiful women of Japan. You read the poetry that filled your notebooks. There were brown moths there now and they flitted in and out of the fields and the gramophones and the wool coats of winter. You wrote couplets and sonnets in the reference room in between questions.

Now you take a sip of water from a paper cup. The taste of wax reminds you of summer and of lemons. You are swollen. You don't remember events exactly. Someone tells you. He called the dogs in

from the snow. He locked the doors and pushed the furniture in front of the windows. And then he reached under the bed where the hunting vests and boxes of folded sweaters were kept. It was a long time before anyone came home. When he was finished, only a poem remained. It was smoothed out on the dresser top. The poem was full of stars. It made sense to no one. A couple of days later your mother drove across town to retrieve it from the plastic bag at the police station. You thought he was sick. You thought it was something simple like strep throat. Your mother yelled into the phone, and then your father took over.

There are two cold fingers on the tender bone of your brow. This is the only purple on your body. The rest of you is pink and pale. You lay back on the bed. You close your eyes. The air is sweet and thick like marzipan. The room falls away, and you seem to peel out of yourself, like a hide that's been pulled back to release the shiny, wet parts. You are transported to the treetop, and then one step up to the roof of the old apartment building. You stand above the attic. Beneath you are the tenets' wedding dresses, their worn out furniture, thirty-year-old stamp collections. The faces of clowns and the word circus. And he is next to you now. And there is time, but you aren't thinking about that. The two of you lace fingers. The two of you pick at the mosquito bites on your legs. His head is shaved again and there in his pocket is the ten dollar bill you lost somewhere at the ballpark. Your mother will want to call the fire department. She will say my babies, my babies over and over until a neighbor wraps her in a blanket and sits her on the curb. You and he will talk as though nothing has happened. He will ask about your father, about the foreign language classes, the sleeping habits of those still at home. The little dog. The books on the shelf. And then the two of you will come down one branch at a time with the slippery pine needles under your feet.

You keep quiet at the library. When the other librarians speak, you leave the room. Quiet is important. It is invisible and unmoving. It

nods its head when asked a question. It sighs and it purses its lips. It wears black heels and a high-waist skirt. It is alone in the cultural norms section shifting down to the decimal. You take the side stairwell where there are no windows and the doors open to the outside so infrequently. There is water in the air there. You breathe it in. The stairwell is hot with fluorescent light. You run. You run up and up, turning and turning, until there are no more stairs and then you run back down again. It's like running the stadium steps at the arena except you've removed your heels and your feet slap the concrete until they ache. This is the only sound you want to hear. It is the sound of you running and the sound of you breathing. These sounds are your sounds, and it is essential that they are small and natural, unforced.

You hold a handful of coins. You don't want to toss them in the fountain, so you place them in your mouth and suck until the taste of blood is overwhelming. The relatives wander the hallways. One of them brings soup from the hospital cafeteria. A few of them circle around your mother. Their hands cover hers. Your father pushes his food into the trashcan. Outside globes of snow dot the parking lot and toss around in the wind. The tops of houses are edged in frost. Their shingles glitter in the morning sun. It will snow and snow for most of the days of the week and the cold will kill things off. Other things will go underground to sleep for awhile. For many months it will be like this. Cold creeping beneath the blankets. Cold in your toes, in your wrists, in all the little places. Cold and quiet for months and months, until everyone's hair is white.

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