

It was the year winter would not relent to spring. It held the world tight in its icy grip; tainting spring showers, mutating them to gusty tempests brimful with sleet and bitterness. I'd wake in the crisp embrace of my snug living quarters. The tall single paned windows and the lofty Edwardian ceilings welcomed in the cool winter air like an old friend, as if it were ushering in that cool climate to the basement where it could; stay, sleep and stir whenever it pleased. Or to send a chill up to the kitchen wherever it wanted to see me shiver just to make itself chuckle. When I tired from the cruel games of the draft, I ventured off to the library. The heat and the quiet rendered it the optimal haunt for me to finish my thesis.

I try to tread lightly as my bulky leather docs cause the floor boards to sigh under the carpets. I trail to the second floor, leaning forward to achieve equilibrium between the velocity of a tweed clad girl in search of source material and the remorseless force of gravity acting down on the weight of my stuffed backpack and tote of books strained at the seams. After a climb Edmund Hilary would applaud, I found myself surrounded by congested shelves and air of calm. Yet my journey was not yet complete.

My destination was in the west wing of the library close to the literature section- on the tip of Renaissance and Elizabethan literature yet in appropriate proximity to the Gothic section. This oasis next to Hamlet was perfect as it faced the back path around campus leading down to the tennis courts. Which meant my ears would only be exposed to the quiet chatter of tennis players, a game so quiet it has bred quiet players. As I approached the extra large desk my tote thudded down on the wood. I frowned at my arm that had fallen into a deep slumber, strangulated of circulation, and then looked up to check I hadn't irritated my fellow residents of the elite wing. I cast my head down again avoiding the gaze of the imaginary Wimbledon umpire, to avoid more upset and possibly risk a code violation.

I eventually settled and dove into debates and arguments; the back and forth much like a rally. I imagined the likes of Foucault grunting as he struck a ball. After hours of study it would be realistic to admit that my mind had wandered perhaps. I thought about the future after the weight of my dissertation had been lifted. After I had torn apart the foundations of a Gothic heroine and displayed the pieces like installations in an exhibit. After my professors with their eyes of discernment and their lips that quirk and quip criticisms cast their gaze upon it. I couldn't picture a life devoid of their judgement as that is all that had consumed me.

Months later when the cap and gown had been donned and the hands of the dean had been shaken, I stared at the winter that had come again. I conceived that life would be monumentally different after graduation. Like the life of an academic isn't fraught with

the rising and setting of the sun and the effervescent nature of the seasons. I looked into the black and saw blue. No matter how many books read, accolades awarded and praises sung; winter would carry on its cruel path regardless of how special I felt.

It was on a frosty night on the eve of the New Year that I decided I would not be pulled down by the weight of the cold. Instead I'd be pulled down by alcohol causing my legs to lose composure. Surrounded by friends the wind felt like a zephyr, and as we neared a bar my patience was infinite, as warmth was promised soon. A bar it was but my already inebriated brain could only make out a church staring down at me. I felt like Ebenezer, in the middle of the Victorians era's Little Ice Age, having his transgressions judged by the steeple with its condescending nature. But entering the establishment it looked more like his bedroom filled with decorations and opulence as the second spirit of Christmas present adorned his quarters. The bar was decked with wreaths, lights lit the walls and the caved roof of the church. We congregated in an even bigger syndicate, with our shared intent of seeing out the year with a sense of joy that the year's events seem to have robbed. The old walls buzzed as the saints in the stained glass windows dissolved into laughter with the rest of the patrons.

I felt a different type of buzzing however like someone trying to contact me from beyond the grave. As my fingers were on the bar, I felt it vibrate with a different frequency. Looking up to see if the 'spectre' was an old friend like Marley or a spirit coming to change my ways. Warm eyes viewed me with regard and as I exited my seance of sorts. I tuned back into the world of the living. "Do you want a drink?". I felt shyness spread its black cloak over me and instinctually sought to hide behind a friend. His sanguine eyes and the expectant ones of the bartender urged a drink order to fall out my mouth like a spell. An incantation that would make the bartender pour, shake, swish and decant. The artifice of the cloak of shyness lies in perception of colour. I saw its black side of protection, blocking out harm, however the outer layer of the cloak is a pale dusty rose which is visible to voyeurs on the outside. A cruel tinge of pink appears that wall-flowers wear like scarlett letters— C for coward.

I fled to the courtyard, choosing the disdainful gaze of the building over an eager one inside. The frigid air tingled my rose coloured cheeks and handed back the reins of control to my rapidly numbing fingers. In a serene moment under the winter sky, I felt the illusory leather ripped from my hands again with a 'Hello'. An introduction was made but the hibernal climate awoke me from my rose thorned slumber, keeping away the flush of cowardice.

We parlayed in our assigned positions like dance partners, moving closer together than further apart in tandem. Advancing and parrying in symbiosis, as if getting too close

would ruin the harmony. The irony was not lost on me that a wallflower is one of the few botanicals that thrive in the cold. The cold and the heat, the black inner and pink outer layer, the ebb and flow of conversation from my shore to his.

Until it was time to exodus in our calamitous battalion on to the next bar. The untimely announcement and sudden movement felt like a riptide between our coastlines, making our correspondence impossible. Like a drowning victim I grabbed on to a life raft for safety. I took his arm making sure we wouldn't separate in the rush. He looked down assuring that the sudden invasion of space hadn't struck the balanced scales of mutualism.

The footsteps of the group clattered on the cobblestone roads down to the final destination before the count down. 1 gate to go through, 2 corridors, 3 flights of stairs and we found ourselves on the top floor of a bar. Christmas lights lit the street below as passersby romped by in groups of 4 and 5, rushing to their final destinations of the evening. I was pulled away from the scene by a question, "Will you be my new year's kiss?". All of a sudden the cloak had come back, but instead of acting like a hiding spot, it felt like I'd been smothered by it. Yes, like it was a body bag. Like I was being wrapped in and thrown in the back of a van for it to ride off only to see a pair of sad brown eyes looking at me.

His calm voice cut through my incoherent babbling and the nightmare that was the back of the dirty van. "I'll leave you a moment to decide". The man didn't mince his words or play in a game of metaphor, as before the dastardly cape could swallow me up again he turned to me with a drink in hand, waiting for my answer. My yes had set off a chain reaction. The patrons started counting down, 5, the cool winter air had sought me out to resume his callous games, 4, the third spirit had plunged scrooge into the grave, 3, the cloak was edging its way to me ready to pounce, 2, warm mahogany eyes caught mine, 1...HAPPY NEW YEAR! As the two hands on the clock met in the middle, so did I and the brown eyed man.

Now we live amongst pages together, but I'm now wise to the notion that pages are not the only place to learn. In warm corners of libraries talking quietly hand in hand or by the banks of a rivulet that babbles quietly as we read to each other. I have someone to help carry my tote and someone to keep me warm in the winters. We walk arm in arm down narrow cobbled streets and explore cathedral gardens together. We dream of the old ruined houses we shall live in and renew with our shared efforts. We kiss on castle walls and seek knowledge about the past because we've found our future. We build forts with the shell-pink cloak and hide within. Our fingers dance across the ivory keys of your piano; you encourage my clumsy fingers. I'm frequently in awe of the perspicacity of his

ideas. I hang on every word he says like fruit hangs on a vine in a summer that never recedes.