

January Days

The girl comes in one wet Wednesday afternoon, trailing mud and leaves with each footstep, raindrops glittering in her hair like an honorary crown. She weaves through the stacks for well over an hour before settling on a paperback from the back shelf. When she brings it to the counter, she gives a smile and her name with the required dollar fifty.

"January," she says, tapping the book lightly against her chest.

The book is 80's pulp science fiction with a luridly purple spaceship on the front. Lief has acquired an accidental collection of these. They are at the back of boxes when people pawn fragmented collections, sneaking onto shelves behind shinier volumes. He has not the heart to remove them, the time travellers, survivors as they are. To actually sell one is something of a surprise. As he slides her purchase into a paper bag, Lief tells the girl his name and her eyes go wide with inexplicable delight.

"That," she tells him, "is the best name. Keep that name."

A week later she's back, tracing creased spines and yellow-edged pages with curious fingers, standing on tip-toe to see the top shelves and kneeling to see the bottom ones, hidden behind crates of unshelved additions. She procures a slender paperback with a pepperpot alien on the cover and bounces to the counter to make it hers.

"You like science fiction?" Lief asks, scanning the barcode.

There are leaves in the frizz of January's wood-coloured hair and a magpie's feather is tucked behind her ear. She wears battered oxfords and a poncho of green crochet. She looks like someone who knows what she likes, and is happy that way.

"No one *knows*," she says, hugging the book like a pet cat. "What the future holds.

What's out there, beyond what we can see. Look how extraordinary the world is, the world we're living in now - who knows what might happen next?"

Lief watches her go, passing the dusty window behind the counter, the book already open and held up to her nose.

The shop he rents is in the basement of a tall, narrow brick building that has been through numerous identities in its lifetime, like a stately actress trying out different parts. Much of Lief's custom is flow-through from the café upstairs - they come for the artisan cheeses and sourdough, get talking about the quotes handwritten across the paper-white walls, emerge hungry for words. Lief does not believe January is one of these people. Her shoes are too worn. She carries change in her pockets, not a purse. Perhaps she saw the sign, *Bellwether Books*, affixed to the street railing outside; perhaps she, like Lief, is a literary romantic who believes bookshops should be quiet and dusty.

(Admittedly it is dusty because he does not clean very often - during the slow hours, he reads behind the counter instead - and quiet because he finds small talk oppressive, but he is not unhappy with the atmosphere.)

Perhaps she simply drifted in one day and liked it here. He hopes she did.

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January is the month she was born. She stepped into the world on New Year's Day - an omen, she's sure, because beginnings have fascinated her ever since.

Sometimes when she buys a book she reads the first chapter and sits back for a while

to think about where the story might go, letting it sit there all fresh and unknown inside her head before turning the page. When she is finished she leaves the books out in the world - on train seats, restaurant tables, in waiting rooms - wherever someone might need something to read. She wishes she could keep them, but that's not how her life works. She doesn't get to keep the things she loves, so deciding where they should go is the next best thing.

It's summer, her birth month, her favourite month. She lies on a carpet of jacaranda blossoms, reading about alien worlds. During the day the park is quiet, just for her - later in the afternoon couples come with picnic blankets and restless dogs, parents with prams, children with shrieking laughter who sometimes race past where January lies reading. She does not mind sharing the park. Everyone goes away, eventually, except her.

When night falls, she finds a good home for her book and goes back to the jacaranda, sliding between the branches to sleep within its wooden core. Her clothes, she leaves in a rucksack among the roots and just hopes it's there in the morning. She has tried a couple of times to live as the park's other people do, but she gets sick if she stays away from her tree too long and being human is so terribly confusing.

In the end, all she really wants are the books.

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He has books waiting for her now, at the front of the shelves.

There is no rhythm to her visits but she's usually in the shop at least once a week and Lief has an idea of what she likes. Robots are good, aliens are better. She always buys

paperbacks, doesn't mind them dogeared or stamped with library logos - in fact she seems to like them old. That's enough information for Lief to work with.

He's good at this part. Recognising patterns, tracing their common lineage in an expanding spiral of analogous narratives: it's a science. Regular customers always ask him for recommendations. January has never asked and he's sure she hasn't noticed the difference, but she buys the books.

Sometimes, if the shop is quiet, she'll linger and talk about what she reads. Lief has read enough science fiction to almost keep up. They debate survival in the zombie apocalypse versus the return of the dinosaurs, the advantages of alien invasion and what's really out there beyond the sky. He asks her where she'd go if she could time travel and she says it depends. "What if I didn't like the future we're getting? I'd have to figure out how to change it. And if people kept doing that, time might collapse. It seems unsafe."

There have always been weeds growing between the pavers, especially in the summer after it rains, but one day Lief comes down the steps from street level and sees patches of dandelions have sprouted across the alley, bright butter gold. Amongst them are other flowers he doesn't recognise, tiny tongues of blue, buds of purple; a wildflower meadow boxed in by brick walls. Oddly, though, the way to the door is still clear. It feels deliberate but can't be. Lief chalks it up to Queensland weather, ever inexplicable, and crosses to open the shop.

A few days later, green tendrils appear in one corner.

Two weeks on and they have thickened into vines, spread across the alley wall in a lacework of leaves, curling green fingers around the street railing. Lief's landlord is baffled but charmed and commends Lief's green thumb.

"I don't know where it came from," Lief says helplessly. "It just...grew."

He doesn't understand what's happening, but he doesn't want it to stop.

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Dryads are nature's forgers. In January's hands, leaves become bank notes. Once she relied on this skill to survive in the human world, but the enchantment does not last and she has come to understand what that means to the recipients of her glammers. For years now, she has tried to depend on other means: stray change lost in the park or street, tricks performed for a weekend crowd.

To the people of the park, she is a riverside magician.

She blows blossoms from her palm and they flutter away as butterflies. Dry twigs twirl between her fingers into the shapes of musical notes, letters of the alphabet, Valentine hearts. She hangs a bracelet of seed pods around the wrist of a dumbstruck toddler while his mother claps. When she decides to stop, punctuating her decision with a bow, there are wistful protests amidst the clapping.

"Where did you learn that?"

She didn't know Lief was watching.

He looks different outside the bookshop - not taller or shorter or anything easily defined, but the wind is ruffling his hair like open pages and there are threads of bronze in the brown that only sunlight sees. January catches her breath a moment, taken aback by the sudden convergence of her two worlds, and by Lief's smile. He looks so happy to see her, even if this is not the side of her he knows.

"Hello," she says. She's smiling too, without knowing when she started.

There are paths all over the park, winding through the different gardens, past the fountains and picnic grounds and around the open air amphitheatre. Through the long light of afternoon they walk in loops, trading stories and small secrets. They fill the spaces between their mouths with words, with terraformed planets and parallel universes and a hundred thousand stars. And the spaces contract, and under the jacarandas she's kissing him while the wind makes lilac rain.

It's not only books she wants to keep.

* * *

Every month is January.

She's in the shop most days, more often helping shelve books than buying them, choosing music for the ageing stereo system, spending rainy days in a chair behind the counter while Lief makes hot chocolate and argues the virtues of jazz. When she brings in a box of books, her beloved paperbacks, and asks that he look after them for her, Lief is afraid she will disappear - why else would she ask? But he takes them, and she stays.

There are things Lief knows about January that have not been said aloud: that she has only words and laughter to spare, that she can follow him home but he can't follow her. That when she lays her head on a pillow, there are always leaves left behind.

The shop smells of new wood, and sometimes the shelves are veined with sap.

One night they stay at the park until everyone else has gone and only the moon's cool white eye is watching. January stands up and takes Lief's hand, leading him to the jacaranda walk and the tallest tree, its branches bare now but the flowerbeds around almost iridescent with winter colour. She puts one hand against his chest, gesturing that he stay put, then steps off the path.

He's watching as she slips sideways inside the trunk. A trick of moon and magic, only it is not a trick.

Lief has never been superstitious, not quick to believe in ghosts or demons, but there is no denying that his girlfriend has just walked into a tree and he *knows* the word for that, even if he's never had reason to say it - still can't say it to himself, 'dryad', though his natural skepticism has fallen into stunned silence. He believes.

He's not sure he *wants* to believe, but he does.

"This is why I can't keep the books," January explains, later, crouching in the dirt and retying her boots. She has not quite met his eyes since she emerged. "I have nowhere safe for special things. My clothes get stolen every so often. It's - frustrating, it's not like I can leave my tree, but I can't spend my whole life sleeping inside."

Lief has temporarily forgotten how to talk. He manages a strangled, "Oh?"

"I thought maybe you could...you could look after them. The books." January lifts her head and he sees it's not books that bother her, not empty shelves she wants.

He crouches in front of her and hesitantly, reaches out. Her skin feels the same, smells the same, the sweet green of earth and wood. She is exactly who she has always been. What's changed is that she trusts him now.

"I'll keep them," he promises. "I'll keep whatever you want."

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The first thing a customer notices when they descend the stairs to Bellwether Books is the garden. It has become an extension almost of the café upstairs, a pair of wrought iron tables set between the wide green arms of an urban oasis.

Everyone wants to know the secret of the bookshelves. They're just so convincing, with their stubby branches and budding leaves - to step inside is to breathe the fragrance of a forest. When asked how he's done it, Lief smiles and shrugs.

"Who says I did? Maybe this is the next stage of literary evolution."

His girlfriend, curled in a chair by the shop window, glances up over the top of her book. She's wearing a long green shirt with big wooden buttons and there are jacaranda blossoms snagged in her hair. Her bare feet are propped on a stack of boxed books.

"You're welcome to guess," January says. "We're keeping a tally."

Later she might go home to Lief's book-strewn flat, dancing to jazz on the balcony while passionfruit vines curl around their feet. Or she might kiss him good night and walk to the park with a rucksack swung over her shoulder.

Her books are safe in his keeping.