

## The Librarian

a Short Story by Jessa Forest

**T**he big table makes you look smaller than you are. Like a little morsel, a macaroon, a petit four alone on a dinner plate. You twitch, fidget. You curl your spine protectively over your phone screen despite the towers of books that surround you. Ponderous toms of science, philosophy, and madness.

The World Atlas *Extraordinaire* sits on a stand older than this building next to you, propped open to the Pacific Islands, resplendently corralled by the cartography of the currents, dancing whorls of sacred scarification.

Each time the door slides open your eyes dart around in your skill like scared rabbits. You're looking toward the door now; the shining glass, the herald of the morning sun. You are waiting for someone.

I like to pretend you're waiting for me—but the girl walks in. (Besides, I'm already here.) The girl with the navy blue sweatshirt and hair the color of milky oil sliding off a dead whale. Her face is younger than mine. Of course, she is younger. All of you are. Her uniform skirt bisects her thighs perfectly, exposing her beautifully formed knee caps and the lacy pattern of veins and arteries flowing under her skin. Her sock-less feet are so dainty that her sneakers could easily be mistaken for ballet slippers.

She should be a ballerina with long, tangled hair. But she is a student and so are you. But you are not wearing a uniform. What day is it? Sunday? Monday? Where is the nearest school?

More importantly, what time is it? It must be near Lunchtime. I'm beyond famished. Even when I eat Breakfast and Second Breakfast I'm still a bottomless pit.

She sits as you stand. You do not hug like I expected you to but you do touch her shoulder as you lean over her chair. You ask her if she needs anything. She doesn't. She pulls out a notebook and her headphones from her pink polka-dotted tote bag. (I have a bag too but it is not made out of polka-dots.) You walk away and she begins to scribble viciously across her blank page, her ears full of music I cannot hear.

Maybe she is a poet. Poets are delicious. They taste like burnt sugar and apricot pipe tobacco. (As opposed to artists, who usually taste like soggy, fermented herbs.)

When you return her head is bowed as if in prayer and your arms are bursting with books. Paris, Venice. Belgium, Madrid.

Travel or History?

What war, if any?

What's your poison?

And why ignore the atlas? It's been sitting right next to you the whole time. Just like I have. Surely maps are not obsolete. I know GPS exists now-a-days but you need more than travel diaries to travel. You have to know how to get where you want to go before you even think about

going there. (I speak from personal experience, of course, but rarely does anyone listen to me...listen and survive, anyway...moving on.)

She plucks her headphones out of her ears and gives you one of the most dazzling smiles I have ever seen one human give to another. Her pink-frosted lips form the shape of the softest *thankyou* I have read anywhere, on paper or on flesh.

Maybe you're planning to run away together. She's already ready. Her tote has extra clothes and a very sharp knife hidden at the bottom (a gift from an overprotective mother, no doubt. Mothers should be overprotective). And you look like you have the money to buy anything else you two might need for a—what is it called? Funny, after all this time I still don't know your words for it.

Getaway? Suicide?

When you only live from one meal to the next? No worrying about where to sleep, what to see next? Vacation?

No, you will have nothing to go back to. When you leave it will be for forever. Your family will disown you, will harry you through the halls and hedgerows, mazes and ballrooms and strip the skin from your sorry carcass if you ever return—no wait, that's me. Not you. Sorry.

I've been living from one meal to the next without worrying about where I will sleep or what I will see next, unless it's food. I eat food, dream food. I always look for food. But my version of you abandoned me long ago.

How long will you wait before you change your mind and leave her?

Good thing you'll never find out. You'll never get the chance to betray her. As you sit and study the geography of possibility I creep closer.

The shadows ebb and flow around your feet.

She doesn't have time to dig out her knife.