



Words

by Alessa

"It's a god-awful sight."

I strolled leisurely through the dimly lit bookshop, my fingertips dancing over the aged and tattered book spines, caressing the stories etched into their weathered surfaces. It was a sanctuary of knowledge and literary treasures, or at least it should have been if it weren't for my feline companion, Sir Shakespurr, who sat arrogantly next to a display of Emily Brontë's poems. With a regal air about him, his eyes bore into my soul, silently plotting my demise with murderous intent. How fortunate I was to have such a charming and utterly disinterested companion to keep my boredom away.

Sir Shakespurr, displaying all the enthusiasm of a stone gargoyle, casually lifted his paw to his mouth, as if to hide a sly smirk, before diverting his attention to a fleck of imaginary dust on his pristine fur. Clearly, my forlorn ramblings failed to capture his refined sensibilities. But who could blame him? After all, I was just a lowly human, prattling on about a bookshop. How could that ever hold a candle to his majestic presence?

Nevertheless, undeterred by his aloofness, I continued my soliloquy to the unimpressed cat. It was a one-sided conversation, yes, but in the bookshop, where words whispered secrets and stories begged to be discovered, even the most sceptical of cats couldn't dampen my snarky discourse.

"No one reads books anymore."

My parents ran a small secondhand bookshop nestled in the heart of the city. Downstairs, the worn floorboards bore the weight of countless tales. Rows upon rows of weathered books stood proudly, their pages whispering stories of distant lands and forgotten dreams. Above this literary sanctuary, our living quarters provided a cosy haven, a refuge from the bustling streets below.

The building, though unassuming, held its own charm amidst the modernity that engulfed the neighbourhood. A humble corner spot, it stood as a beacon of nostalgia in a sea of sleek facades. It certainly didn't boast the polished grandeur and sterile monochrome furnishings of the nearby library a few minutes away. There were no abstract paintings hanging on the walls, no solid-coloured chairs, and definitely no discounts and promotions. The fancy library barcodes were unknown here; we operated on a much more sophisticated system of manual searching and hope.

"In a few more years, there will be no bookshops left." My voice took on a softer tone.

The air within this place carried the weight of time, as if it were trapped in a bygone era. The worn-out furniture, a haphazard assortment of pieces, added to the charm and gave the store a quirky, lived-in feel. The walls, cluttered with books of all shapes and sizes, created a cosy but cluttered atmosphere where every nook and cranny is filled with literary treasures.

Dim lighting cast a soft glow, provided by the incandescent bulbs that dangled from the ceiling. Unconventional, perhaps, in a world obsessed with efficiency, but my parents believed it lent a certain ambience that other lights couldn't match. The low-hanging bulbs were not just for show; they served a practical purpose, making it easier for us to change them. But on clear days, I often relied on the sunlight streaming through the windows.

"Just the thought saddens my heart."

Despite the dim lighting that bathed the room in a gloomy haze, there was an undeniable charm to this place. The air carried a faint scent of yellowed pages, mingling with the musky aroma of well-loved books. During summers, I'd sit on the floor with a fan beside me, reading through the pages of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. In the winter, I'd fix myself a large cup of tea in the back room and curl up in one of the armchairs, engrossed in Ernest Hemingway and Victor Hugo.

And on rainy nights like tonight, I wanted to fall asleep to the sound of my mother's voice as she weaved enchanting tales from Aesop's Fables, the words cascading like raindrops, carrying me into a dreamscape.

"They prefer to read stories of fourteen-year-old girls in high school romances." I pursed my lips in disapproval and leaned against the register counter. "Or rather, stories like that are often written by fourteen-year-old girls—stories about various boys falling in love with a single fourteen-year-old girl and her falling in love with an arrogant yet handsome athlete simply for the fact he toys with her emotions and has a great outward appearance." I lightly crossed my arms and stared pensively at the wooden floor.

"How would *you* then fall in love with someone?"

Startled by the unexpected voice that pierced the stillness, my body jerked in response, causing me to spring up from the countertop. I stood there, muscles tensed, feeling a rush of embarrassment wash over me after realising that I had not been alone in the bookshop after all. The thought of someone hearing every word I had just said made me cringe. Emerging from the higher reaches of the bookshelves, a young girl with wet, matted blonde hair and a damp school uniform came into view.

"I—I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to get out of the rain and—" she stammered, her words faltering, her apologetic, mossy green eyes meeting mine briefly before flickering downward and fixing on the floor.

"Do you want a towel?" I swiftly interjected in an effort to alleviate the awkward situation.

As her gaze lifted, I couldn't help but notice a solitary droplet of water gliding down her cheek, tracing a path along her soft jawline before surrendering to gravity and falling onto the floor. At that moment, I marvelled at the sight of someone so young and so beautiful gracing our store.

"I—if you wouldn't mind, that would be nice—"

"Take off your blazer as well. I'll hang it up by the heater in the back," I offered, my voice infused with a touch of concern.

With nimble fingers, she swiftly unbuttoned her blazer, revealing a simple navy-blue vest adorned with the school emblem. She handed it to me, and I made my way to the back room, returning with a towel clutched in my hands. Tossing it towards her, I watched her grasp it midair in a swift motion. I raised an eyebrow, piqued by her swift reflexes.

Her petite frame began to sway as she used the towel to vigorously rub her drenched hair. Her hair was going every which way, wild and dishevelled, only making her even more adorable. But despite her efforts, her blonde locks were hardly near the point of being considered dry.

"Really?"

"What?" She stared at me, entirely confused. I let out a sigh and took the towel in my hands.

"Have a seat," I gestured towards the worn, dark-brown armchair nestled in the cosy corner of the bookshop. Her curious gaze met mine, momentarily hesitating, until I repeated my invitation with a touch of insistence. "Sit."

With a hint of uncertainty, she swiftly found her way to the chair, sinking into its plush cushions, a mixture of curiosity and uncertainty dancing within her eyes. Positioning myself behind her, I caught her questioning gaze, but gently guided her head back down and faced it forward.

"If you don't take the time to properly dry your hair, you're just begging to catch a nasty cold," I lectured her snarkily.

I took hold of the towel and began drying her hair for her, delicately rubbing it against her damp threads of shimmering gold. With each stroke, my fingers brushed through the silky tendrils, marvelling at their incredible softness. As the towel worked its magic, her shoulders eased, and a sense of tranquilly enveloped her. In the midst of this quiet scene, I noticed Sir Shakespurr elegantly leaping down from his perch on the bookcase. With a graceful saunter, he approached us, his tail swaying in quiet anticipation. Nuzzling against the knee sock of the girl's leg, he let out a soft meow.

"See? Sir Shakespurr's trying to dry you off, too. He doesn't want you catching a cold, either."

The girl chuckled and ran the back of her hand against the cat's fur. I felt her tilt her head slightly upward in my direction.

"D—Do you always dry the hair of your customers?" Her voice was soft, and her words were warm. I liked the sound of them. I noticed that the tips of her ears were warm, and felt myself smile.

"Do you always go into the rain without an umbrella?"

A faint blush painted her cheeks like a delicate veil, adding a touch of vulnerability to her already captivating presence. In that moment, her innocence drew me closer to her, like opening the pages of a new book. As the waves of self-consciousness subsided, her body relaxed, melding harmoniously with the soothing rhythm of my touch.

"I was wondering if you had a book I was looking for." Her voice was a whisper.

"Which book are you looking for?"

"Aimee and Jaguar by Erica Fischer."

"Ah, that's one of my favourites." I smiled to myself at the memory of reading it for the first time. "I'll find it for you."

Gently releasing the towel from her hair, I draped it over the armrest of the chair. As she rose from the seat, Sir Shakespurr gracefully disengaged himself from her legs, his feline presence drifting away like a fleeting shadow.

"Come upstairs with me," I motioned for her to follow, turning towards the staircase. We ascended the steps that led to the upper level of the bookshop, each wooden step protesting with a creak, adding an air of antiquity to our journey.

As we climbed, the girl's eyes scanned the rows of book spines that adorned the wall opposite the railing. The aroma of old paper and ink was always stronger up here. Most of the popular classic literature was shelved here, and countless evenings had found me curled up with many of these books. The upper level was a perfect place to read because no one could see much of the space from the main floor below.

"You never answered my question," she said from behind me, breathless after climbing the staircase.

"Which question was that?" I asked her as we came to the top of the staircase. I turned a corner and slowly started scanning titles and authors.

"The question from before... How would *you* fall in love with someone?"

I blushed at the memory of her interrupting what I thought was a discussion with myself. Determined to regain composure, I shifted my attention to the row of books before me. Silence settled like a fog between us, but she was patiently waiting for my answer. I stopped; my hand rested on a copy of *Well of Loneliness*, its presence seemingly purposeful, as if it had chosen this very moment to capture my attention.

"If I fall in love... it would be with someone who is *not* a fourteen-year-old school kid." I looked at her askance. "But more to the point, I think it'll be the person's words I'd fall in love with." My voice quivered, an uncertain thread of sound that escaped my lips.

In truth, I had never truly experienced the bliss of love. Throughout my life, I had cast despondent glances at the people who momentarily captured my attention, but the depths of love eluded me, slipping through my grasp like an intangible dream, leaving behind only the ache of yearning for that lifetime connection.

"It'll be the words spoken, the way they are spoken..." I slowly moved my eyes towards a section of Shakespeare. "It'll be how eloquently my prospective love stitches them together. It's words above anything else." I moved my fingers across the spines of works by Virginia Woolf.

"Or even if someone is at a loss for words. The way they don't know what to say... it's cute and life-affirming..."

In reality, thinking about this hurt my chest. I was so envious of them all—fourteen-year-old schoolgirls, athletic boys, wordy writers, and illiterate customers who visit bookshops only when they need a birthday present. They all had someone to hold, someone to call their own. Meanwhile, I was cooped up, surrounded by fantasies written in black ink on mouldy paper. I was entombed by fiction because I had no power to make it reality.

"Because of all the phrases in every language, there's just no comparison they can find for their feelings towards you."

I looked up, and my eyes found the work of Erica Fischer.

"Yes, if I were to fall in love, I think it would be because of words." I reached for the book on the shelf and turned towards the girl, holding it in my hands.

The way her gaze fell on me was something I had never experienced before. Her orbs of green jade were glowing softly, and her lips were tipped upward in the shadow of a smile. She looked so awestruck and entranced, I had to glance away.

"That was beautiful," she murmured. "And the most poetic explanation I've ever heard."

My face grew warmer. "Here, I'll check this out for you."

I moved past her and our shoulders lightly brushed against each other, sparking an unexpected warmth at the point of contact. The sensation left me momentarily transfixed. A rush of emotions surged through me as I turned back to steal a glance at her from the top of the staircase, only to find her gazing back at me with equal surprise. I quickly averted my gaze and continued descent down the stairs, my footsteps echoing with the faint sound of hers trailing closely behind.

Standing at the counter, my fingers deftly entered the price while she retrieved the bills from her pocket. Unspoken words hung in the air between us, and the quietude persisted as I retreated to the back room, returning with her school blazer that had mostly dried.

"Thank you so much for drying it."

"No problem at all. Happy to help." A faint smile tugged at the corners of my lips. Our eyes briefly met, only to engage in a game of "who can look away faster," as if avoiding eye contact was an Olympic event.

"Here's your book." With an unsteady hand, I gave her a small plastic bag that held her "Aimee and Jaguar" novel within. "I hope you like it."

Her eyes lit up, a hint of excitement sparkling in them. The exchange was more than just a transaction; it held a shared connection, an unspoken understanding.

"Thanks," she mumbled, putting her blazer on and taking hold of the bag.

I could only bring myself to nod in reply before regaining my senses. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Danielle. And... yours?"

"Vanessa." I retrieved an umbrella from behind the counter and held it out to her. "Here," my gaze drifted towards the raindrops splattering against the windowpane. "You're going to need it."

Her fingers brushed against mine while accepting the umbrella, and a momentary fumble made her almost drop it. Her face flushed crimson, and without meeting my gaze, she stammered another 'thanks' before proceeding towards the door. I watched her retreat; so proper and neat in her school uniform, yet so daring and carefree. When she reached the door, I felt something in me speak out.

"Co—Come again!"

My words stumbled through the air, leaving me momentarily breathless. She halted in her tracks, turning to meet my gaze, a radiant grin slowly spreading across her face.

"Will do!" her reply echoed, the voice carrying a hint of excitement.

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Winter had now settled in, casting its icy embrace over the town, and with each passing day, I found myself eagerly anticipating her arrival. The rhythm of her visits became as predictable as the ticking of a clock. Yet, as soon as she crossed the threshold, she would disappear amidst the labyrinth of books, leaving me wondering if she was merely a figment of my imagination.

In those fleeting moments when she approached the counter to make a purchase, time seemed to slow. Our interactions were brief, with little more than a few words exchanged, but the air between us sparked with a silent understanding. Sometimes, she would seek my guidance, asking for book recommendations, and I would gladly point her towards the balcony. The simple act of seeing her smile—a radiant beam that illuminated the dimly lit store—was a reward in itself.

Our encounters remained fleeting and ungraceful, punctuated only by stolen glances and whispered suggestions. And yet, in the absence of words, an unspoken bond grew stronger. I found solace in the moments we did share. Each encounter was a chapter in our story, and even if the pages were sparse, the emotions they evoked were lasting.

With the arrival of the school holidays, the familiar rhythm of the bookshop shifted. Days turned into weeks, and in that expanse of time, I realised that I hadn't caught a glimpse of her.

Perhaps, I mused, she was caught up in the whirlwind of familial obligations. After all, the holidays are a time for reunions and family gatherings. Maybe she simply didn't have a moment to spare, preferring her loved ones over visits to the bookshop. It was a plausible explanation, one that offered solace to my yearning heart.

I reassured myself, conjuring up story plots in which she was immersed in family affairs, making cherished memories that would linger in her heart for years to come.

Yet beneath the veneer of understanding, a flicker of longing remained. The bookshop felt emptier without her presence, and the stacks of books seemed to whisper tales of her absence. As the days of the school holidays slipped away, I couldn't help but wonder when our paths would cross again, when the melody of our shared connection would resume its enchanting tune.

"Vanessa, have you made hot chocolate?" My mother asked as she stepped behind the counter while I leaned on the front of it.

"Yes, there should be plenty for everyone."

I turned my gaze towards the bustling main area of the store, where a congregation of individuals had gathered, occupying various chairs, their attention fixed upon a solitary figure sitting on a stool. It was the monthly readings—an event that the bookshop hosted to support aspiring writers in the community.

The participants varied in age and experience; they were a vibrant mix of unpublished amateurs, students from local universities and high schools. Writers, young and old, were always encouraged to share their works—poetry, prose, essays, whatever it was. The room resonated with an energy of anticipation as each writer prepared to unveil a piece of their soul to the captive audience.

As the evening unfolded, I found myself recognising a few familiar faces from previous similar events. They had all been drawn to this literary gathering, seeking an outlet for their own creative aspirations. It was an invigorating sight. Witnessing the convergence of young minds, eager to express themselves and leave their mark on the literary landscape, made for an exciting evening.

"Looks like a good crowd tonight," my dad remarked, walking up beside me and leaning onto the counter, his voice filled with a mix of pride and satisfaction. "Lots of people are buying books, too. Business is looking good."

My mother and I smiled at him. Engaged in conversation, they exchanged lighthearted banter while I allowed my gaze to linger on the diverse gathering of individuals. The hum of chatter filled the air, blending harmoniously with the soft rustling of pages, the clinking of teacups, and the occasional bursts of laughter.

Amidst the crowd, a familiar figure caught my attention. She was the smallest in the group. Her golden locks shimmered under the soft glow of the overhead lights as she gracefully rose from her seat and took her place on the stool. My curiosity piqued. I focused my ears, eager to hear what she had to share. The anticipation stirred within me, as if an unspoken whisper beckoned me to listen closely to her voice.

"Umm... what I wrote isn't as fancy as everyone else's," her voice quivered with uncertainty and self-doubt. She shifted uncomfortably, her eyes darting around the room. "I'm no good at this sort of thing, but I hope you like it anyway."

She looked down at the crumpled piece of paper in her hands, her fingers tracing the edges anxiously.

"Words, she says. I'll fall in love with words, she says."

My body froze, as if the frigid air that swept outside had seeped into my very being. She continued on, her voice gaining strength with each word.

"At first, I couldn't understand it. How could one possibly fall in love with someone's words? After all, words are nothing more than a jumble of letters put together. Words are just meaningless things on paper. I found it confusing; I didn't understand any of it."

I found myself leaning forward.

"Because... I don't know words. I don't like words. I like music. I like animals. I like the feeling of catching a ball in my hands, and the opening of presents on my birthday, and I like getting an A on a history test I didn't study for. Those are the things I know."

There was a small murmur and laughter from the crowd. I was smiling.

"I don't know words. But I want to know them. I want to know the words she's talking about."

I stared at her, though my eyes were misty. The room fell silent, captivated by the vulnerability and honesty of her voice as she poured her emotions from the page in her hands.

"I want to know the words she's read. The words she's talking about. The words that she indulges herself in every day. The words that make her laugh. The words that make her smile. The words that make her heart beat fast. The words that surround her. Because when she walks, she runs her hands along the book spines, soaking in all the words through her fingertips. I want to know the words she knows."

My heart was beating uncontrollably.

"So I spent days after days investing myself into these words. These words she's come to love. His words, her words, their words, new words, old words. Words, words, words. But I still don't understand. I don't get it. These words go over my head, and I'm drowning and drowning because I just don't understand. I don't know words."

Her gaze shifted away from the paper in her hands, and the restless movements of her fingers subsided. Instead, her eyes locked onto mine, unyielding and intense. It felt as if time had momentarily frozen—as if in that suspended moment, our souls intertwined in a silent understanding, and only her unwavering stare was needed to bridge the unspoken distance between us.

"But I do know *her*. I know that she likes to talk to her cat. I know that when she dusts, she hums to herself. I know that she twirls her hair when she's confused. I know that she smiles when she reads Shakespeare. I know that she likes to stand in the sunlight. I know that she's not tall enough to reach the top shelf. I know that she likes to dry hair. Those are the things I know."

I brought my hand up to my mouth. My heart felt like it was going to burst.

"Eloquently, she says. I know that I like how she says it. *El-lo-quent-ly*. I know that I like how it rolls off her tongue. I know that I like her eyes. I know that I like her smile. I know that I like how she moves so gracefully between bookcases. I know that I like her voice when she says words. Any words."

I had to step away from the counter. With my hand still pressed against my mouth, I let my feet guide me through the maze of familiar bookcases. Emotions welled up within me, threatening tears to spill over. I was stirred by an indescribable mixture of joy and awe as her voice lingered in the air, weaving its melody like a delicate symphony between the rows of shelves, while my heart danced to the cadence of her words.

"I'll fall in love with words, she says. And even though I don't know words, even though I don't understand words, even though I'm only fourteen—I think, for her sake—I can still try. Yes, for her sake, I want to fall in love with words, too."

As the audience gave her a loud round of applause, their admiration reverberating through the air, I ascended the staircase that led to the upper level. With each step, my heart pounded in my chest, and a whirlwind of emotions enveloped me. I turned the corner and pressed my back against the spines of Orwell and Twain, my breaths coming in ragged gasps while tears threatened to spill. This wasn't happening. This wasn't real. I heard footsteps racing up the stairs, and when I turned my head, I saw Danielle standing there, staring at me, slightly out of breath and blushing.

"Were you really watching me this whole time?" My voice was a whisper.

"I always came here to study," she said. "And you were always working; you were always so interesting. The way you held the books, the way you turned pages—you loved every single word you saw and every word that was around you. Before I knew it, I was watching you from afar. I was fascinated by everything you did. I wanted to talk to you, but I didn't know how. What would a kid like me have to say?"

I stayed quiet, and she took a step towards me.

"Would I have anything in common with you? What was there for us to talk about?"

She took another step.

"That rainy night, I decided I wanted to start reading all the books you read. But all I really wanted to do was talk to you. Your voice..."

She was standing right in front of me now. I kept my gaze on the floor.

"Your eyes..."

Her hand touched mine.

"They were so much better up close."

In the muted glow of the dim light, her eyes shimmered with a strange radiance. Our faces were mere inches apart, close enough to feel the gentle caress of her breath. As she exhaled, her warmth enveloped my lips, creating a delicate mist that hung between us, teasing the boundary between intimacy and longing.

"I..."

"Shh," I whispered, barely audible. My eyes locked with hers. "Enough words."

She pressed her lips against mine.

Among the spines of fiction I had engrossed myself in since I was a child, I felt the ink of my own words and letters, the ink of these figments of my own imagination, transform under her kisses and tumble into reality.

They tumbled ever so eloquently.

The End