

A Story Before You Go

Torn black skirts sweep across the cold, shiny floor. It's so dark, you can hardly make out the color of the floor, but it still shines, as if just polished. No one has mopped here in ages, no one's dusted the shelves or swapped out the bulbs in the light fixtures. No one remembers this place at all. But still, the floor glistens.

Carved into the walls are ornate shelves, maple wood covered in golden carvings that chase each other up and down the walls, a fairy tale in each. Each carving is different. Here, you might see a dragon tearing its way across the shelves, each scale detailed and perfect. But just a few rows down, there are pleasant carvings of little gnomes picking flowers on a snaking riverbed. Everything that never lived is carved into the bookshelves, from Snow White to Babayaga.

Read a book or read the shelves, it's all the same.

Everything here tells a story, I suppose, as long as you know how to find it.

The black skirts swirl around feet that tread softly over the library's soft rug, down the hallway and past each brown wooden table.

The vast room at the end of the hallway is even grander, filled with innumerable bookshelves, stuffed full with dusty velvet volumes and neon plastic hardcovers alike. Ladders stretch up towards the towering ceiling. In the center, surrounded in stacks of unshelved books and weathered papers, is a large, black box. Stone. Covered in vines.

But you already know this. You've been here before.

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Everything was a rush, and Rav hated it.

He could already hear breakfast dishes clattering downstairs, which meant he was already late. His brain rushed forward, flinging him out of bed, hastily dressing, and dashing out of his bedroom door, but his body stayed still.

But all of a sudden the door was flung open, and in a blur of mint-scented breath and flying hands, someone screamed out the time, gesturing wildly at the clock, hollering about lateness and laziness.

So out of bed Rav went, brushing his teeth and dressing and sprinting to keep up. Down the stairs, to more yelling, out the door to screeching tires, and down the street to a green light he'd miss and a stop sign he'd blow through.

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In a sterile white room, a little girl lay on a colorless bed. Just a week ago she'd been running in puffy pink tulle, darting between sparkly birthday banners and the sequined dresses of her friends.

But now, she was too tired to miss the glitter and vibrance she loved. And so she lay there in her cold steel bed, under paper thin gray sheets, and fell asleep. Alone in a bleach-white room.

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Abel had traveled the world a million times over.

His cold, wood-paneled bedroom was filled with maps, photos, artifacts, and souvenirs from around the world. His wife had loved jet-setting from country to country, and her treasures filled the shelves. Snow globes from England, worry dolls from Guatemala, antique figurines from China.

But Abel's wife was gone, and all he wanted to do was go home. But it was too late. His hometown no longer existed, nor the people that filled his childhood. And even if they did, his hospice nurse would never allow him to fly eight hours across the world.

And so he closed his eyes for the last time, millions of miles away from home.

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The tattered black skirts flowed across the shimmering floor towards the stone box. The vines covering the box writhe and twist, growing and contracting over each other like a hive of entangled snakes.

A skeletal hand emerged from the folds of the black robes and reached towards the box.

And so Death retrieved his first soul.

Ram came tumbling from the box, nerves shot and fingers trembling. Calmly, Death reached around him and pulled out a small, light-colored book. Three letters were printed on the cover. *R A M*. Death gathered Ram in the soft black fabric of that heavy cloak, opened the book, and began to read.

It was a tale from the mountains, about a place where sheep and cattle lounge in sleepy villages. In the pages of the book, sunsets hung in the air for hours in hills that smelled like warm tea and cotton blankets.

And for the first time, Ram relaxed.

The story took him on a journey through the peaceful life of a child in the mountains. Just like that, the stress of life melted away. Ram smiled, as Death's soft voice brought this idyllic world to life.

And then the story came to an end. Gently, Death closed the book. And Ram was gone.

Death rose, and reached again into the stone box, for the soul of the little girl. She came gently, shivering and small.

Death wrapped her up in black silk, and pulled her book from the stone box.

Hers was a story of wonder. Death read slowly, painting a world of magic around them. In the pages of the book, dragons colored the skies and flickering spirits hid in vegetable gardens around the world. Young princesses chased sparkling fairies through flower beds and streams. Flocks of robins and bluejays accompanied heroes and queens to distant lands.

The little girl smiled. She could see it all. The magic, the stars, the enchanted beasts.

And then Death closed the book, and she was gone.

Finally, Death reached into the box and retrieved the old man. Abel. Abel had been on Death's doorstep for years. He knew what came next, and so he greeted the familiar face of Death as an old friend and settled in to finally hear his story.

Death pulled a worn, leather book from the stone box. And he began to read.

The story told of Abel's lost home. Between those two covers, the past was alive. Abel once again ran barefoot through yellowing fields with his friends, giggling like school children.

He clamored up trees and lay on their branches, eating plums while juice ran down his chin. He held his little sister's hand. He hugged his father. He sat down at the dinner table and once again tasted his mother's signature berry pie.

At ninety-six, Abel finally went home.

And then the story ended. Abel looked at Death. He was tired. And so he closed his eyes as Death gently shut his book.

And he, too, was gone.

The task complete, Death rose from the box and once again swept across the silent library. Black skirts swirled across the floor as Death passed rows and rows of books. Each unique. Each waiting.

Death rounded the corner. His cloak billowed, brushing gently against *your* book.