

Page's by Jessica Wang

The bookstore was the kind of building that a careless passerby would not notice unless they were looking for it. The fact that the store shared the side street with a few flashier, bolder attractions did not help its cause. There to the right of it was a brightly lit cosmetic store that boasted its newest products in the front window. The pretty little store manager spent an afternoon of every week redecorating the display. To the left of the bookstore was a intage movie theatre that welcomed daily patrons of all ages and intentions; elderly couples hobbling hand in hand, seeking a dose of cinematic nostalgia; excited parents dragging their reluctant children along; curious teenagers forced to explore the town's history through this assignment or that. The theatres showed oldies from Monday to Wednesday and on the weekends, and 3 feature films every Friday. Thursday was their day off, and the north end of Hazel Street was considerably quieter on that day.

The bookstore survived on wandering souls seeking to kill time in between meetings or dates, tourists who had more careful eyes than the town's residents, and the occasional true book lover. Although few people in the town knew it, the bookstore has been there longer than both the movie theatre and the cosmetic store. It had lilac walls and dark mahogany shelves filled to the brim with books of every shade and tone. The store was drenched deep in the scent of fresh lavender and musty ink, and the carpeted floor muffled every footstep to the point that it seemed like the ancient whispers of poetry and prose called out from the pages as one walked by. The shop had been around since Elliot Page moved from Toronto to Kingston in the autumn of 1997. He was quiet man with light hair and soft eyes and a slightly melancholic air. "Page's", he had called the store then, laughing to himself at the perfect coincidence that was his surname and his new profession. The store was open every day of the year, and had been for the entire twenty years of its existence.

Elliot lived a short block away in a modest townhouse, and he walked to the store early every morning to open it up. He spent the days sitting behind the red oak counter near the main entrance, greeting customers and categorizing books.

Sometimes, he would write on loose sheets of paper while glancing out the front window. It was an old habit of his; he liked to compose descriptions about the people who walked by. He was doing precisely this on a cloudless Thursday afternoon when the bell of the shop gave its familiar sharp tinkle. Looking up, he saw a girl with swaying dark hair walk by. Her narrow shoulders slumped under the weight of the backpack she carried. He gave her a polite nod, which she returned with a bright smile. In his experience from his careful observations of people, Elliot guessed the girl to be about 16 or 17 years, and predicted that she was likely there to conduct research for some school project. Most young people bypassed the bookstore on their way to the movie theatre. Satisfied with his analysis, he returned to his people watching.

A man, tall and stern, dark blue suit with silver cufflinks, about 40 years.

A young woman, long blonde hair, large sunglasses, seems utterly confident of her appearance.

Two boys in grey school uniforms, being drooled over by two giggling girls in identical uniforms.

When he grew tired of the descriptions, he set down his pen and picked up one of the books from his desk. It was an old favorite, and he lost himself in it for the next few hours. He was shaken out of his reverie by soft footsteps. Outside the window, the sunny day had given way to darkness.

“Hi, I’m Viviane.”

It was the girl with the dark hair. Elliot was surprised to see that she was still there.

“Elliot Page,” he replied curtly.

“I was just wondering what days the store was open? There’s no sign anywhere,” the girl trailed off, looking around uncertainly.

“Everyday.”

The girl seemed satisfied with this response and left, giving Elliot a little wave on the way out.

The next day, Viviane returned in the afternoon, and stayed until it was dark. She came again on the day after, and the day after that, until her daily afternoon visits became a regular occasion. After a while, she started to talk to Elliot during her reading time. She told him about her grand ambitions and careful schemes, and he liked listening to her speak so animatedly, and with such vibrant hopes about her life to come. She reminded him of himself, when he was younger and filled with the thirst of one who was still becoming.

“I want to be a writer someday. I want to write a book that becomes the book that makes someone else want to be a writer,” she told him.

“Have you read any books like that?” he had asked.

“A few. They’re hard to come by.”

“As are most special things,” he answered.

“You could say that,” she agreed thoughtfully, then returned to her reading.

“Are you going to try to read every book in the store?” he inquired on a particularly windy Wednesday afternoon.

Viviane shrugged. "I like it here. It's too loud at home. Besides, you're always adding new books, so I'll never read all of them."

"I guess so."

"My parents are always telling me that writing is waste of my time, and that I'll never get anywhere with it anyway."

"I take it you don't agree with them?"

"Obviously not. Besides, I like the walls here. Lilac is my favorite color. I'm assuming it's also yours?" she asked curiously.

"Something like that," Elliot replied gruffly, and said nothing more.

When autumn came around, Viviane stopped coming on the weekdays. She walked by the store on the way home from school, and waved at Elliot through the front window. On the weekends, she returned to her usual routine of afternoon visits. She had taken to exploring the back corners of the store, and disappeared among the shelves for hours at a time. One Sunday in early winter, when the store was beginning to empty, Elliot went to look for Viviane to inform her that he was closing soon. To his surprise, he found her sitting at one of the armchairs, calmly copying down the contents of a small, gold-trimmed book into a leather-bound notepad.

"What are you doing?"

Viviane looked up. "I really like this book."

Elliot reached forward and grabbed the book. The cover of the small volume read "The Language of All Flowers, a comprehensive dictionary". His hand shook slightly.

"There's a whole big section on types of flowers back here," Viviane continued. "Are you a secret florist at heart?"

Elliot shook his head slowly. "I think you should head home before it gets too dark," he replied softly.

She picked up her book bag and walked slowly out of the store. Elliot opened the book and thumbed carefully through the thin pages. Then, he sat in the armchair in the semidarkness, shrouded in memories.

On Viviane's next few visits to the store, Elliot did not make any attempts to talk with her. Instead, he sat at his desk and wrote on his papers. At times, she would look up and catch his eye, but he always looked away abruptly.

"I'm sorry for copying the book. Do you want me to buy it instead?" she asked after weeks of this silence.

"No, it's fine," he replied, not looking up from the book he was reading.

"I just felt like it was something I wanted to have in my own writing."

"That's good," Elliot said, turning a page.

She glanced around the store, then down at his desk.

"What's this?" she asked, gesturing at a small pile of papers covered with his swirling print.

"A way to kill time."

She picked up the paper and read his thoughtful descriptions about the people that passed by the store window. In spring, he wrote about how they carried bright umbrellas and wore cheerful grins despite the incessant rains. In the summer, he said that they were exuberant and impatient. In the autumn, he described the falling leaves as a colorful storm. On the bottom of that page, there was a footnote, that read: "dead leaves meaning sadness, mourning"

"I like that flowers and plants have meanings," she remarked.

"So do I."

"Is that why that flower dictionary book is so important to you?"

"Not the book itself," Elliot answered.

"Who gave you the book?"

"Bought it myself. First book I ever got with my own money. I had to save up for it."

"How old were you?"

"Eleven or twelve," he closed his book and leaned back in his chair.

"That's a strange reading choice for that age. When I was eleven, I was really into those detective book series," Viviane laughed.

Elliot shrugged.

"So why did you choose it?"

He sighed. "I don't want to take away from your reading time. There are some new books in the middle shelf, if you want to check it out."

"I don't feel like reading today. Tell me a good story," she begged.

The old man sighed. He looked out the window and was silent for a long time, and then he began.

"A long time ago, a mother told her son wonderful bedtime stories. She told him about pretty places and distant rumors, and when he was old enough, she taught him how to read. Every Friday, she would take him downtown and they would visit the bookstore. They would each pick out a book and read until their eyes grew sore and their backs felt stiff. And then, they would walk home in the dark. The boy could always count on Fridays, because no matter what, come rain or shine, sleet or hail, there was his mother, and the books, and so he was happy.

Sometimes, she would write him stories to read. Her handwriting was very plain and blocky, but the way she could use words to make something meaningful always made up for that. She could only write good stories using purple ink, because she said that purple helped her think.

Then, one day, his mother left early one morning in the midsummer haze, with a blue headscarf in one hand and a faded orange suitcase in the other. All that the boy had to remember her by was a pink azalea that he found later that day on his bedroom windowsill. The boy knew that all flowers had meanings, and pink azaleas meant 'take care of yourself for me', and so he did. He didn't crumple in despair or become vengeful and furious. In his mind, the message of the flower was a hopeful one. He thought that it meant that the giver of the message had the intention of coming back for him, and that he should live happily until then.

The boy continued to go to the book store every Friday, hoping that by some miracle of time and space, his mother would be there, waiting for him like she always did. But she was never there. He looked for her in every person he walked by, but nobody was ever her. They were all just strangers. So the boy grew up and left for school, and then one day, when he went back to the bookstore, he found that it was gone, too."

Viviane was listening with serious eyes. "Then what happened?"

Elliot paused. "He left his home city, and moved to a small town, and he stopped waiting for her. He let her go and lived a good life."

The girl smiled at this. She then walked towards the closest shelf and picked out a book to read. As usual, she was the last customer to leave that night. Before she went out the door, she paused in front of Elliot's counter.

"The thing I like best about telling stories," she said quietly, "is that you can fix things that can't be fixed. You can make things that never happened seem as true as you and I."

The bell tinkled shrilly as the girl walked out into the fluttering snow. Elliot waited a long time after she was gone, then slowly opened his side drawer and retrieved a small wooden box. He opened it, and was surprised to find that his hands were very steady as he pulled out the single object the box contained.

A faded pink azalea, withered with age.