

The Librarian

by Vysotina Alisa

I

Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

She loved the big clock in the hall. Its monotonous clicking sound always induced in her some kind of a meditative state like a giant metronome, which served as a brand-master, who created a rhythm for her while she was reading. Tick-tock - next line. Tick-tock - from left to right. Tick-tock - word by word. At some point she realized that she couldn't concentrate unless there was a soft somnolent ticking of the clock on the background. In truth, it was too ugly and too big for this small library. No one knew its story, although the clock itself seemed to have been hanging there absorbing history for a good century. The rusty hands were not as shiny as they used to be, and the paint on the body was covered with cracks. Stains of dirt marked the clock face here and there like age spots. But she loved the clock. It was her only loyal and solemn companion in quiet days and even more quiet evenings.

So soothing and calming. Tick-tock. Tock-tock.

'Hello? Are you the librarian here?'

Jane shuddered from the sudden voice that brought her back to earth. She blinked frightenedly and replied:

'Yes, I am. Can I help you sir? Are you looking for a specific book?'

The man behind the counter was very young, a student maybe. His wild brown hair looked like a total mess, but his charming open smile made up for it.

'No,' he replied smiling widely. 'I'm not here for books. I mean, of course I'm here for books, but not in the way you think I am.'

Jane kept looking at him, puzzled. Two student girls who were studying at the table nearby, turned away from their books, and one of them whispered something in another's ear, then both looked at the young man and giggled.

'Well, you see,' he glanced at the plate with her name on the counter, 'Mrs. Stevenson -'

'It is Miss, Miss Stevenson.'

'- I saw an advertisement, saying that there is a vacant librarian position. I would like to fill it,' he added with his Hollywood smile.

'You would like to fill it?' Jane asked, perplexed.

'I would like to fill it,' - he repeated.

Jane was rather surprised, because the young man, who was speaking twice faster and louder than she and had smiled as much for the last two minutes as she had for the last week, didn't look like a librarian type. On the contrary, he looked like a person who would definitely choose any other profession over a self-imposed lonely confinement with dusty books. But she decided not to make hasty conclusions: never judge the book by its cover.

The young man turned back and looked at the girls. He smiled at them charmingly, and winked. That caused a new surge of flirty giggling.

'What was your name once again?'

'It's Mark Mathews. But you can call me Mark, Miss Stevenson.'

'It is a pleasure to meet you, Mark. You can call me Jane, if you like,' she added diffidently and paused to collect her thoughts. 'Um, right. You see, I'm taking maternity leave and consequently I need a replacement. Mr. Wallace, who is our library director, asked me kindly to interview possible employees.'

'Sure,' the young man replied. 'That's why I'm here, Miss Stevenson.'

'But I will be back,' she added hastily. 'You need to realize that it is a short-term contract. As soon as I figure out my... business, I will be back.'

'Just as the advertisement says. Don't worry, Miss Stevenson, your library will be in capable hands,' he said, and winked to her playfully.

Just after she was told not to worry, Jane started to worry immediately. This smiling young man began to give her chills.

'Right. I am going to tell you about the job in order for you to get a full impression about being a librarian in St. James Public Library. As a librarian, you will be a doorkeeper to the temple of knowledge, where every book is a key. Every key can open a door to human history, mysteries of the universe, or even someone's heart. Some people know the doors they are looking for, some people don't. The librarian's duty is to guide them to where they need to go. It is a great responsibility.'

Mark was looking at her perceptively, and seemed to be listening with attention. She couldn't say if he was really interested in what she was saying, or just being polite. Jane felt uncomfortable, because she had been struck by a disturbing thought that he was jeering at her, although he didn't show it anyhow.

'This is, undoubtedly, a dream job for a book lover,' she summed up with a little blush on her face. 'I hope you do like books, Mark, don't you?'

'Sure, Miss Stevenson. I wouldn't apply for the job otherwise.'

'Right. Do you have any job experience?'

'Well, nothing special. I worked as a shop assistant, back when I was a teen, and as a call center agent last summer. None that I could be proud of. Now I'm studying Economics at Compton University,' he mentioned quite proudly though.

Jane thought that the fact that a librarian's responsibilities are far more than just flirting with female students might scare the flippant young man away.

'Let me be more specific. First of all, it is a part-time job. The library budget is small, and Mr. Wallace works here as well. The librarian position requires working flexible hours, because sometimes Mr. Wallace is able to work mornings, and sometimes evenings. As you might have already understood, there is only one library worker at a time and due to that you have to be able to work well alone.'

She hoped to see disappointment on his face, but he had the same mask of politeness put on. Jane waited for questions, but since there were none, she continued.

'You need to know that sometimes you may feel the lack of variety and the job gets quite monotonous. Owing to the fact, the candidate must be self-organized. Also take into account the uncompetitive salary.'

'I get it, Miss Stevenson,' Mark interrupted. 'You don't believe in me because you think I'm too young and not skilled enough to cope with this job.' Mark bent forward to her, and almost whispered in a confidential manner, 'But I can assure you,' he started, elevating his right brow, 'that I fit this job perfectly. I'm well informed about your financing problem and I'm going to solve it out once and for all. I'm going to change this place for the better.'

After Mark finished, he took a long dreamy look at the window. Thanks to that he didn't see the terror on Jane's face.

'What do you mean by saying that you are going to change this place -'

'For the better.' he underlined.

'- for the better.' Jane's lips grew white and she was looking without a blink at Mark with her eyes wide opened.

'Well, you see' he began in an unconstrained manner, 'I've been coming to this library since I was a kid, and it hurts me deeply to see its current state,' Mark made a dramatic pause and then pointed at the folder he was holding in his hands. 'Here, I have a plan for the renovation and rebranding of St. James Library. I'm sure you agree that it needs some fresh air. For example, we could get rid of all the old books and buy cheap softcover ones instead. People use to ruin books, tear their pages, make marginal notes, but we won't need to repair and clean them when we have softcover books. You can simply chuck the ruined ones away and buy new books!' He bent forward to her and asked with his broadest smile, 'Now, how brilliant is that?'

Jane slowly moved backward from the counter feeling an upcoming panic attack. She had even forgotten about her morning sickness.

'Chuck the books away,' she whispered in a dull manner.

'Exactly. Now you got my point.'

Jane was looking at him, speechless. The library was her home, her life, her sanctuary from the other world. She was 36, and one third of her life had been spent working here, and every table, every shelf and every step of the ladder were remarkably familiar to her. Even cracks on the walls seemed to her age wrinkles on grandmother's kind face. Jane could feel the building breathing, she could almost hear its heartbeat. It definitely had a soul. Sometimes one could hear clearly how it sighed deeply, as if it were having some gloomy or sorrowful thoughts, or grouching with displeasure, complaining about the weather.

But the young man didn't feel the library's heartbeat, he couldn't hear it sighing.

'What else... ' he continued with an air of an expert. 'We could sell library membership cards for 15\$ monthly fee. The money earned can be spent on repair works, because, you know, these walls needed a renovation years ago.'

He frowned and looked around with a shadow of disgust on his face. Then his eyes stopped at the giant clock in the hall.

'Take, for example, this ugly clock. It will require a fortune to take it off the wall. Anyway, I'm going to show this folder to director Wallace, and we will make this library a better place,' he sighed with delight. 'Maybe as a present for your baby shower even.'

Jane raised her hands as if she was trying to defend herself from his words.

'Thank you, Mark!' she almost shouted. 'We need time to consider your candidacy and we will not hesitate to contact you in case of a positive decision.'

'I know that we are going to meet again, Miss Stevenson. I can feel that we are like minds. I will leave the folder for you to study, I have another three copies at home,' he said and smiled charmingly. Then he turned around and moved to the exit, whistling a catchy tune.

Later that night, when Jane was warming up ready-made dinner in her lonely apartment, she kept thinking about her encounter with Mark Mathews. Was she right, trying to protect the library from perhaps necessary changes? Or maybe it was the time of the youth, and the ugly old library with its broken librarian couldn't stand a chance and needed to be got rid of? That she would never know. The dinner was sickening, and she couldn't finish it. Heavy thoughts didn't leave her even in bed and the baby in her belly seemed to feel her disturbance, tossing and turning uneasily.

II

That day the library was quiet, even more than usual. It was a warm and sunny Sunday, one of a few that were left in September. Parks and streets were crowded with people, who were trying to enjoy the last days of Indian summer. Street merchants offered cotton candy and sweet nuts to the strolling folk, cheerful music poured out on the streets. Who wanted to spend time within the chilly library walls on a day like this?

Jane was sitting at her counter, gluing the book together with its cover, feeling sorry for poor Oscar Wilde, who definitely didn't deserve being torn apart. She used to murmur something comforting, while she was repairing books. All these volumes, saved from cruel bullies' hands, were wounded birds, which found themselves in Jane's loving hands. She ran her fingers over their spines, caressed the covers, whispered to the pages. The books were living things, and every one of them had its own temper. For instance, 'The Invisible man' was a loner, it didn't like being touched without a purpose. Its pages were shaggy, and the cover corners were unfriendly sharp. It was also rather stubborn: the book always resisted being opened widely and smoothed out. But once you love it enough to read it for the second, or even the third time, it would soften and fit your hand perfectly, loving you back. 'The Martian Chronicles', on contrary, was a stray dog, looking into the eyes of passers-by with a fervent desire to find a new home. Its cover curved in a sad smile after getting wet from the leaking roof last year. The book always remembered the exact page where you stopped your reading, and opened itself gladly anytime you wanted to continue. They were all different, these books. As were people.

Jane sighed with sadness, pressing the cover to the bookblock and asked Mr. Wilde to put up with it for a little longer. He kept grim silence.

'Hey there. Are you the librarian?'

Jane raised her head from the book and looked at the visitor. It was an odd-looking young girl about 23 years old, with black hair and red dyed locks in it. She also wore excessive clothing and makeup that seemed alien in the antique interior of the library.

'I clearly am,' Jane answered. 'Can I help you? Do you need books for studying?'

'I ain't need no books ma'am. I came here to get the job.'

After saying that she smashed her hand with the advertisement down on the counter. Jane jumped up on the chair and her glasses slipped off to the tip of her nose. Mr. Wilde clicked disapprovingly with his cover.

'Here it goes: St. James Library has a short-term contract position available for an assistant librarian, bla-bla-bla, part-time job, flexible hours. Qualifications: organized, able to work well alone, and so on,' she read quickly. 'So, I'm here to apply for this job.'

Jane opened her mouth to reply, but the young girl interrupted her.

'Are there any job interviews or whatever it is I need to pass?' she asked impatiently.

'Interviews. Sure. Library director, Mr. Wallace, asked me to find a replacement for myself and to interview candidates.'

'Huh,' girl snorted, looking around. 'Leaving this shithole for a better life?'

'No, it's not like that,' Jane protested. 'I am taking maternity leave,' she explained, pointing at her big belly.

Girl looked at Jane with sympathy.

'I understand you perfectly, ma'am. Got a test with two lines myself two months ago.'

'Oh, you are pregnant too? Congratulations!'

Girl knitted her brows.

'What? Hell, no! Jeez. When I got one up the duff, I got rid of the baby. I mean, I had an abortion. His daddy scarpered right after I told him, and I don't wanna have a sponger sitting on my neck and raising him by myself, you know.'

The most terrifying thing about the girl was how calmly and casually she was talking about things like that. Jane instinctively put her arms on her belly, as if she were trying to protect the baby from the cruel words the girl had just said.

'I'm Betty, by the way.'

'Jane Stevenson.'

Girl looked at Jane's arms, crossed on her belly.

'Well, Jane, your guy did a runner as well, eh? I don't see any expensive diamond ring on your finger.'

'No, it's a bit different,' Jane confused. 'We were married,' she continued quietly, looking at the floor, 'and on the day I was about to announce my pregnancy, he said he didn't love me anymore.' She paused. 'He said, he had fallen in love with another woman.'

'What a scumbag,' Betty replied with contempt on her face. 'Hey, but why didn't you tell that asshole about the baby? At least, you could get some monthly cash from the child support.'

'I don't know,' Jane said quietly. 'I guess I didn't want to stand between him and his woman. I didn't want to interfere.'

'Jeez, ma'am, it was that jerk who had interfered with his dick and loaded you with his baby, he had to answer for the consequences.'

Jane thought of her ex-husband and felt sick. The memory was still fresh, and she couldn't think of him without a pain in her heart. She remembered the days when she was still happy to come back home every evening. They had been together for 7 years and during this long period of time she had made him the center of her small happy universe, where she revolved around him with opened arms. Jane made tasty and varied meals to please him, she bought beer for the games on Sunday TV. She cleaned, she sewed, she kissed, she loved. Now she would

probably be in that happy laughing crowd on the street, walking arm in arm with her husband, listening to his stories and enjoying the feeling of sunlight on her face. But she didn't have a husband anymore. He was gone, and she was left all alone, with nothing but a bunch of sad nostalgic memories and a baby, who would always remind her about his father.

'Can we move to the interview, if you don't mind?' Jane asked in a trembling voice.

'Sure. Go for it.'

'Right. Bethany, if you don't mind my asking, why have you decided to choose this job after all? I don't mean to be rude, but you don't strike me as a book lover. I'm sorry.'

Betty threw back her head and laughed aloud.

'No, I definitely ain't no nerd. I just have to look for a job near my place, and the library's just across the street.'

'Why so?'

'Because, I can't go a mile away from my home without this motherfucker starting beeping!' she exclaimed, and lifted her trouser leg, exposing a bracelet on her ankle. 'I'm on parole.'

'What did you do?' asked Jane in dread.

'I killed a librarian,' said Betty with a serious look on her face. 'Just kidding,' she added hastily, watching Jane's face growing pale. 'They busted me for shoplifting, that's why no one in the neighbourhood is eager to give me a job. Assholes think I'm going to steal their stuff. But then I saw your ad, and I thought to myself, "Hey, here's a perfect job for ya, Betty, they won't give a damn about your shoplifting history at that library, 'cause who would steal fucking books, right?'"

'So, you don't read books?' asked Jane, trying to regain her composure.

'Nope. But, um, I can give books to people if they know what they want. You have some kinda list here, do ya? I'm a quick learner and stuff.'

Jane almost felt sorry for Betty, but there was no way she could leave the library, the most precious thing to her in the whole world, in the hands of an irresponsible girl on parole.

'Right. Bethany, why don't you leave me your phone number,' she said, holding out a pen and a sheet of paper to the girl, 'and I will let you know about our decision'.

Betty took a sheet of paper and started writing.

'Ma'am,' she said in a whimpering voice, 'I really need this job, I mean it. I can give up smoking weed during my work hours, I swear. I'm totally cleaned out, I really need some cash right now.'

'I can lend you some, I guess.'

'That'd be awesome!'

'Will ten dollars do?'

'Ten dollars will do. Cheers, ma'am!', she exclaimed, and left the library.

When Jane got home, she walked straight into the bedroom and fell on the bed. She looked at the giant dirty stain on the ceiling, in its right corner. That flat was the only one she could afford on her small salary. Jane got nothing after the divorce. She realised that she could have gone to the law and sued her husband for money or property, but she felt so depressed after he left, that she barely could force herself to get out of bed in the mornings. It happened so, that Jane was all alone in the whole world, and her husband was her only kin. Had been. There was

no one to stand up for her in that difficult period of her life, and she just gave up upon herself. As she always did.

And now she was going to bring a baby to this world, and bring it up by herself in this dirty flat. Perhaps, Betty's cynic words had a grain of truth after all. Jane was terrified by the thought that soon she would have to hold her baby in her arms, responsible for its life and welfare. She couldn't even take care of herself. Jane turned her head to the right and looked through the window. St. James Library's roof was shining in the sunlight. The only place she felt happy in. When the baby was born, the library would no longer be a place where she could escape from depressing reality. The only thing Jane wanted right now was to wake up without a baby inside. What kind of mother would think of that? Jane didn't know. She slept heavily and dreamless that night. The baby was lying without a move.

III

The one thing that made the library a special place was the air. As soon as the main doors were closed after a newcomer, all outer noise ceased immediately, and the silence fell upon the sanctuary's guest. Silence, that was only broken by the luring whisper of old pages being turned. Sweet smells and odours of dust and ancient paper enveloped visitor, taking them in the library's arms, comforting and loving ones. The library was regardless of time and space, everything feels different here, as if it was its own country with its own rules. All the troubles and heavy thoughts disappeared in the air at the moment the one had entered the library. They all were taken away by Arthur Conan Doyle, Shakespeare, and Ray Bradbury, who touched your fingers and thoughts from the times past by means of old books. The windows seemed to be giant screens, that were showing some non-existent reality. You could see people passing by, rain pattering against the windows, wind blowing trees, but everything seemed unreal, compared to the silence and coolness of the library hall and majestic bookshelves. There were just a few times, when quiet and peace of the library were broken from the outside. Sometimes one could hear a wind howling in the walls, as if the building itself was wailing trying to fight off the nature forces. Then all visitors raised their heads and looked up anxiously at the ceiling and walls.

On a day like this, Jane was sitting at the counter, reading a book. Hall door opened, and wind with rain gusted through. A young woman, pushed by the wind, entered the library, unsuccessfully trying to close her umbrella. She shook up her head, to shake off raindrops from her hair, and entered the main library hall. She came up to Jane and smiled.

'What an unpredictable weather we have here,' she said. 'You never know when you will put your umbrella into use. I'm lucky to have one with me today, thanks to the forecast guy.'

'Let me take your coat, I will hang it by the heater,' Jane suggested. 'It needs to be dried out so you won't catch a cold.'

'That would be very kind of you,' thanked the woman taking off the wet coat. Then she glanced at the book on the counter. 'Oh, you are a Bulgakov devotee too, as I can see.'

Jane was pleasantly surprised by the woman's familiarity with the Russian author.

'Oh, yes. I am an admirer of his works.'

'Is it 'Master and Margarita' you are reading?' she asked.

'Yes it is,' Jane replied flattered. 'I'm actually rereading it for the third time.'

"But what can be done", the woman quoted, "the one who loves"-'

'- "must share the fate of his loved one", finished Jane and smiled. 'So, how can I help you? Are you looking for Bulgakov's volumes?'

'Not today, thank you. I saw an advertisement, saying that there is a vacant librarian position. I've been off work for some time, and now it's time I found myself an occupation. I love books and libraries, so I think I would be great here.'

The woman seemed so right for this place, that Jane felt both happy and sad because she would probably have to leave the library sooner than she thought.

'Oh, I see. That's true, we have a vacant position. I'm taking maternity leave, and the library director, Mr. Wallace, asked me to find a replacement for myself.'

'Oh, you are having a baby! Congratulations!' the woman exclaimed.

Suddenly she gasped as if she had remembered something important.

'I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself. My name is Rebecca, Rebecca Clifford.'

Jane's heart missed a beat. Rebecca Clifford. Now the reason why her husband had left her had not only a name but flesh as well. Though Jane tried to erase every trace of his existence from her life, she couldn't do the same thing with her mind and memories, no matter how badly she wanted to. She remembered clearly the day he left as if it were yesterday.

He came home, late as usual. He always did in the last few months. She was in the kitchen, setting the table for dinner. Some rustling noise was heard from the bedroom. She called her husband to eat, and when he came in, she realised immediately that something was wrong. He stood there with a blank stare, looking through her, as if he didn't see her at all. Jane stood motionless holding plates in her hands. He opened his mouth, and uttered these horrible words, that were cut on her heart ever since.

'I don't love you anymore, I'm sorry, Jane.'

Like in a slow motion she was reading his lips saying, 'I'm leaving you.'

Just a second. What is a second? What can be possibly done in a tiny second? A door can be closed, a choice can be made, a name can be shouted. A second is enough for a pile of plates to drop out of Jane's hands and reach the floor. But that viscous and thick second was endless. Jane thought that she was cursed to live that second forever. But it ended with a loud sound of breaking plates, as abruptly as it started. And with these plates, Jane herself had been broken. A second is enough to burn someone's heart out and to cross them out of one's life.

Jane looked at Rebecca across the counter. She was a young woman, a bit younger than Jane. With a slight feeling of envy Jane noticed that even now, with messy and wet hair she looked pretty.

Despite everything, Jane couldn't just turn her away without a reason.

'I'm Jane Stevenson,' she said in a trembling voice. From the look on Rebecca's face she realised that she had no idea who Jane was.

'Nice to meet you, Jane. So, is it a boy or a girl?'

'What?'

'The baby,' Rebecca repeated, 'is it a boy or a girl?'

'I don't know yet.'

'Waiting for a surprise, huh?' Rebecca smiled. 'Your husband must be so excited!'

'I am divorced.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry! Gosh, I am so rude and nosy sometimes. Please, forgive me.'

'Are you married?' Jane asked suddenly.

'Oh, yes, I am. Me and Brad got married five months ago.'

Rebecca seemed to be so happy that Jane could barely stand it. She thought about taking the rest.

'How did you meet? If you don't mind my asking.'

'No, of course I don't. I worked at the bookstore a few blocks from here. Brad used to pass it by after work, and once we had a long conversation on books. So he started to come by every day, we talked a lot and finally we fell in love.'

Jane got a lump in her throat.

'Like in a fairytale, true love with no barriers,' she uttered quietly.

Rebecca stayed silent for a moment, as if she were making a decision. Finally, she decided to share.

'To tell you the truth, it was not that rosy. Soon after we realized that a horrible thing happened,' Rebecca continued, 'I found out that he was married. I decided to cut him off, but he kept coming, saying that he loved me, and how miserable he was in his marriage.'

'But why?'

'I don't know, he just said he didn't love his wife anymore, that's it. That he just had a habit of returning home every day, and he felt miserable there.' Rebecca paused for a second. 'But he never actually said anything in particular about his wife, like she nagged him, or treated him badly. Brad only said that they were together for 7 years, and at the end he felt nothing towards her. No love, no hate, no sympathy, as if she didn't exist.'

Jane felt a sudden surge of pain. Now she saw it all clearly. She remembered all days he came home late, the indifference he showed, all the endearing words that were never spoken.

'One day I thought to myself: "why does the man have to suffer in a miserable marriage?", so I called Brad, and told him that our relationship was only possible if he told his wife the truth. I didn't want to be someone's mistress, sneaking around, you know.'

'No good at sneaking around, true,' Jane said, hardly restraining her tears.

'I thought that he would hesitate,' Rebecca continued with an excitement, 'but can you imagine my astonishment when he came back next evening with his stuff in his bag?'

'I can,' Jane replied.

'I think that everyone deserves to be loved. Let me put it this way: everyone must be loved. Love is the only thing that makes us humans, that makes us feel alive, keeps us able to strive against all difficulties prepared for us. We need to love so that we could get and give, because without giving, people get callous and turn into stone sculptures with no soul. Who am I to stand against the power of love?'

After finishing her inspiring tirade, Rebecca looked at Jane, waiting to see some kind of approval on her face.

Jane realised that despite her desire to hate the young woman, standing in front of her, she just couldn't do that. She was nice, and it was not her fault. In fact, it was no one's fault. She used to blame Rebecca for taking away her husband, but now she realized distinctively, that

she did nothing to be blamed for. This was just the way this world was designed. Things like that just happened.

'If you are right,' Jane smiled bitterly, 'then I am doomed forever. I have no one by my side. My only love and passion is this library,' she made an indefinite gesture with her hand, 'and soon it will be taken from me too.'

Rebecca looked at her with astonishment.

'How can you say things like that?' she exhaled. 'You have the most precious thing in this world! Something, that I can never have myself because of my health problems.'

She reached across the counter and put her palm on Jane's belly. Jane shuddered with unexpectedness.

'Listen, Jane. There is another heartbeat in you. You will never be alone. Your child is the only creature in this world that loves you selflessly and undividedly. You will always be loved, Jane.'

Jane looked at Rebecca for a minute, speechless, thinking of everything she had just heard. Suddenly, she came to a conclusion that brought her great relief. She felt alive for the first time of the past difficult months full of struggling with herself. And now all the burden was just gone. It just disappeared.

She smiled and said, 'Looks like you are the right person to take care of this library, while I'm away, Rebecca. Why don't I show you around?'

Rebecca smiled in return and nodded.

Jane slowly stood up from her chair, hugged her belly with her arms and said, 'Right. I am going to tell you about the job in order for you to get a full impression about being a librarian in St. James Public Library, Rebecca. As a librarian, you will be a doorkeeper to the temple of knowledge, where every book is a key...'