

Little Free Library

Dave Gregory

Isabelle died under the watchful eyes of more than nine hundred hedgehogs—adorable figurines of wood, stone, or fabric, with black beady eyes and tiny bulbous noses, whose spikes ranged in texture from fluffy to piercing.

She was only sixty-one but hadn't been taking her medication. Isabelle distrusted doctors and would rather spend money on books. Collectible hedgehogs weren't cheap, either.

Following the funeral, the task of clearing Isabelle's belongings from her small, rented home fell to her younger sister, Marion. She took Monday off work and asked her teenaged son and his best friend to help. Marion's eyes moistened while packing sentimental items—their mother's pearls, a pre-school portrait of the sisters in matching pink dresses—but she couldn't help laughing, along with the teenagers, at the abundance of useless figurines. Marion hoped the local thrift shop would take a few hedgehogs off her hands. The city dump could have the rest.

After saying goodbye to her son and his friend, Marion closed the vehicle's roll-up door, then returned for one last look. The rooms were bare. No trace of her sister remained, except a trail of carpet indentations, like footprints, where Isabelle's bookshelves and knick-knack tables had gathered dust for decades.

Before climbing into the cab of the truck, Marion paused at the lone ornament decorating the front lawn. Atop a post sat a red, wooden box, about the size of a filing cabinet drawer. The wider side faced the street. A pane of glass dominated its latched door and allowed pedestrians to see, from the sidewalk, about thirty hardcover novels and trade paperbacks inside. A brass plaque above the small door read, "Little Free Library. Take a book. Share a book."

Titles included *The Bluest Eye*, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, *Washington Black*, and *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*.

Marion had read most of them and was perplexed because the two library boxes on her street never contained anything other than self-help books, outdated software manuals, and romance novels.

She reached for the door to collect the books, since they technically belonged to her departed sister, but decided to leave them, believing it would've made Isabelle happier knowing her neighbors had such wonderful novels to read.

Marion took one step away, then returned to the tiny library. A folded sheet of paper protruded from one volume. She opened the little door and discovered several books had notes tucked between the pages, prominent as bookmarks.

She opened *In the Dream House* and removed a blue line- page, the three-ringed kind she'd used in high school but hadn't seen since. Unfolding it, she discovered an undated note addressed to Isabelle. Compact handwriting filled both sides. The signature simply read, "Abraham." Two folded sheets inside *The Great Believers* were also addressed to Isabelle and signed by the same hand. In all, Marion collected seven mysterious letters.

"This book affected me in the most stirring way ..."

She hadn't meant to read it, it felt like opening another person's mail, but the handwriting was so clear. The next note began in a similar fashion, "The best thing about this delightful book ..."

Marion realized she'd uncovered a series of book reviews.

It made no sense. The criticism seemed scholarly and had required effort—Marion recalled such angst, in high school, whenever a book report was due—but Isabelle might not have seen these prior to her death. With a house full of books, she didn't need to trek across her lawn for reading material.

Marion wondered who Abraham could be. It was bizarre to write critiques for so many novels, then leave them inside a Little Free Library, addressed to Isabelle, but practically on the street where anyone could get at them. Considering all the ways to communicate in today's world, Abraham's notes seemed pointless.

After climbing into the U-Haul, Marion started the engine and inched onto the road. Her thoughts drifted. Sunlight filtered through a leafy sycamore and Marion heard Isabelle's voice, from a long ago phone call, explaining she'd been on a date.

"A what?"

"A date."

"You?"

"Yes, me."

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday. Someone caught my eye."

From her seat inside the truck, Marion wondered if that date's name had been Abraham. Wanting to concentrate, Marion pulled alongside the curb.

The coffee date went poorly, Isabelle had confided. The man said something stupid and any glimmer of romance vanished in a single sentence. Marion removed the keys from the ignition, put both hands on the wheel and tested her recall of that phone conversation.

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In the fall, almost two years before her death, Isabelle noticed a stranger on her street, an older, overweight man, shabbily dressed, pulling a red wagon. Had a grandchild been riding the Radio Flyer, it would have appeared normal but the cargo was three nondescript, brown boxes, one balanced atop the other two. Half a block away, the man came to a stop, opened the door of a Little Free Library, then bent over his cart. Lifting several books, he placed them neatly on the interior shelf, latched the clear door and continued on.

When he came to Isabelle's property, he restocked her mini-library as well.

His behavior undermined the general rule that front yard libraries were initially filled by the owner. From then on, collections expanded or shrank, one item at a time, as locals used the facility. Reminded of her long departed father, a voracious reader who encouraged her delight in the written word, Isabelle smiled at the stranger's eccentricity.

A month passed before she saw the man again—saw and admired him. Not physically. He had unremarkable attributes but she respected librarians, held booksellers in high regard, avid readers appealed to her on a cerebral level—so any man who voluntarily filled Little Free Libraries seemed noble and enchanting.

By her third sighting, she'd deciphered his routine: late each Monday afternoon, he approached from Lancaster, restocked each of the three public bookshelves on her quiet street, then turned right on Frederick.

After the first snowfall, Isabelle expected his philanthropy to end but, when he turned the corner pulling a toboggan, bearing another array of boxes, she put both hands on her cheeks and wept, as though he were a returning soldier. His oversized grey coat, and hood lined with faux fur, appeared as magical as Santa's red suit.

Once he'd gone, she rushed outside to see what gifts he'd left. Some books were used but most were new, with unbroken spines. Seeking the benefactor's warmth, she opened the glass door and caressed a glossy dust jacket.

Every Monday, from behind a sheer curtain, Isabelle waited for the Little Free Library man and watched him work. He had a kind face. He radiated generosity and scholarship. An attraction blossomed. By spring, she decided to meet him.

From her porch, dressed in a pale blue raincoat, imitation Burberry scarf and her newest pair of boots, she ventured a bashful, "Hello."

When the tweed-jacketed stranger didn't respond, Isabelle recited her opening line, "I admire your taste in fiction." She hoped to sound flirty but not too forward.

The man said nothing.

"I'm Isabelle."

"Uh...Abraham."

She smiled and gazed into his deep brown eyes. "Abraham. I like that. Can I buy you a coffee, Abraham, to thank you for filling my tiny library?"

He didn't answer.

Marion repeated her offer and tilted her head toward the main street. "There's a café around the corner."

He looked at his wagon as though it disqualified him from the invitation.

"It's wheelchair accessible. I'm sure we can bring the Radio Flyer inside."

He looked at his feet, then at the bright red tulips rising from a thin strip of soil next to the house. "That might be n-nice."

They walked, discussed the weather, and soon ran out of things to say. Perspiration appeared on his brow. It amused her to see a man as nervous as a sweaty teenager. She felt girlish waiting by his wagon, watching him place three new volumes in the final library on her street.

At the coffee shop, Abraham had to reverse and reposition his wagon when the front left wheel caught the frame of the automatic door. With the entrance blocked, a patron in a dark suit commented on "a grown man and his wagon." Isabelle laughed but regretted it when a drop of moisture raced from Abraham's forehead to his jaw.

"Let's sit and relax." Isabelle steered him toward a square table with only three chairs. Abraham parked his cargo in the fourth spot, above a bright blue and white wheelchair logo, painted on the floor.

Placing his order required a language Abraham didn't speak. "J-Just coffee, please. Nothing too big or strong," he told Isabelle, hoping she could translate his request into something from the complicated and enormous overhead menu.

Isabelle returned with two steaming white mugs. There were creamers and sugar packets arrayed in bowls on the table. She waited while he selected three white packets, which he tore and emptied into his mug before folding them into neat squares.

“I’ve been dying to know your story.”

“Hmmm?”

“The wagon. Donating novels—such fine, lovely ones. It must get expensive. Why do you do it?”

Abraham sipped his coffee, made a face, then poured two more packets of sugar before answering, “I d-do it for my mother.”

Isabelle blinked. Her cheeks flushed. She waved a napkin to give herself more air. Such sweetness. Pure sweetness. Even his stutter was endearing. She noted his unadorned ring finger.

After another sip, he glared at the sugar packets but resisted. “She loved reading, loved libraries. After she s-stopped driving, twenty years ago, I took her to the main library, every three weeks when her items were due.”

“That’s very kind. You used past tense. Has she...left us?”

“N-nearly a year ago.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“Thank you. She lived to almost ninety. I never imagined how much I’d m-miss her. I think she’d approve of my bringing novels to whoever can’t access the main library.”

He sipped again, fidgeted with another sugar packet but returned it unopened. “She had a great appetite—for reading, I mean. She’d sign out a dozen books at once. That was either the limit on her card or all she could carry. Within th-three weeks, she’d read them all and was eager for more.”

“Is that when she used micro-libraries? Is that how this started?”

“No, she hated those. When I suggested it, she practically spit. Said they were nothing but dumping grounds for unwanted books.”

Isabelle laughed. “Sounds about right. Until you came along.” She batted her eyes and regretted not practicing in front of a mirror.

“This is my way of h-helping. I visit different neighborhoods every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.”

“I congratulate you. It’s very noble.”

Abraham sipped, refolded the empty sugar packets, then sipped again. Isabelle thought he was going to say something. He didn’t.

“I’m a solitary creature but I love novels. Any bearer of books is welcome in my world.” Isabelle hunched her shoulders and lowered her eyes. She’d laid herself bare, opened herself to rejection.

Abraham didn’t respond. His eyes were on the damned sugar again.

“I’d love to see the rest of your reading list.”

His head jerked. “It’s Mum’s reading list, I can’t take credit. The used books are ones she enjoyed, over the decades. She liked p-prizewinners, too, and read the book section in the Saturday paper, then put a hold on anything with a good review. So the new books are ones she’d be reading, if she were still here.”

“It must cost a fortune.”

“I inherited a fortune. My dad got it from his dad, who did well in the automotive industry, nearly s-seventy years ago. After Dad died, Mum lived f-frugally—always said she’d been ‘raised by a parsimonious old farmer.’ Hardly spent a penny. Wouldn’t use more than two drops of soap on a whole sink of dirty dishes. Buying a book was an extravagance when libraries loaned them for nothing.”

“I’m certainly not ashamed of buying books,” Isabelle neglected mentioning her interest in collectible hedgehogs, “and I’m glad you’re not ashamed either.”

She waited for Abraham to speak but he remained silent.

“You should see my bookcases. I have row upon row of them.” Isabelle hoped she sounded enticing.

Across the grey Formica tabletop, sat her shimmering knight. She imagined Abraham’s arms around her, studied his spikey grey hair and pictured running her fingers through. She wanted to take his hand but hesitated. She was out of practice with men. So few were worth pursuing.

After an awkward silence, Abraham returned to his story. “The value of the estate increased despite Mum living off it for a quarter century. Everything came to me but I d-don’t need it, I

retired six years ago with a generous pension, so I donate, a little at a time, to readers in the community.”

“That’s generous and thoughtful. You’re a wonderful man.”

“I don’t know about that. Mum was often d-disappointed in me.”

He emptied a sixth sugar packet into his coffee.

Isabelle pretended not to notice.

“You’re a gallant creature. Any mother should be proud. What didn’t she like?” Isabelle held her breath and hoped he didn’t have a drinking problem. She prayed he wasn’t cruel to animals.

“For starters, she said television killed my soul.”

Isabelle’s jaw dropped. “Where is there time for television with all these great novels to read?”

Abraham’s eyebrows rose high on his forehead. He laughed. “Oh, I don’t read them. Reading was her thing. I like television. Mum always nagged me about watching too much TV but I love sports, crime dramas, and all those g-great reality shows.”

Her fantasy ended, Isabelle curled tighter than a hedgehog. She felt foolish for painting such a false picture of this stranger, this fat old man.

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Seated inside the parked U-Haul, Marion vividly pictured Isabel and Abraham on their date. She relived the joy of learning her sister had met someone and suffered again the sting of Isabelle’s disappointment.

“I’d rather swallow razor blades than spend an evening watching strangers sing, bicker, or mate on television,” Isabelle told Marion at the time.

Isabelle said her date’s name was Abraham, Marion was positive, but book reviews were never mentioned. They remained a mystery. Knowing why Isabelle suddenly lost interest might have inspired Abraham to write them but Marion doubted he was that perceptive. Few men were.

Marion closed her eyes and filtered memories until she recalled another phone conversation. Isabelle was coughing then, her voice already ragged from the illness that would claim her.

“It’s been weeks since our date but he took a moment from his Monday rounds to knock on my door. Saddest man I’d ever seen. Looked at me like I’d stolen his wagon. Offered me a package

wrapped in lime green paper with a pink bow. He thought he could buy me.

“I-I-I saw something you’d like,’ he said.”

Marion laughed at her sister’s imitation of Abraham’s stutter.

“I b-b-bought this for your home library, not the one by the street.’

“I can’t accept that,’ I said. ‘Please take it back.’ I looked at my watch—as if I had somewhere else to be.

“B-b-but it’s for you,’ the poor man whined.

“We stared at each other a full minute before he said, ‘I don’t get it. We had a c-c-connection—until you closed up and fled the coffee shop.’

“So I explained, ‘The connection was literature. I thought you were someone different. It’s magnificent what you’re doing. Old ladies venture out, the second you depart with your wagon. They delight in the treats you bring. But when I think of you and all that television...’

“He didn’t understand a word. He raised and shook the gift-wrapped package, hoping I’d shut up and take it, and be his girlfriend.

“Then I said, ‘Unless fiction fills your soul, unless literature means something to you, there’s no place for you in my life.’

“I ignored his wet eyes and looked at my watch again. I lied about a doctor’s appointment,” Isabelle said and coughed without irony.

“Abraham whispered, ‘I can change.’ That’s exactly what he said, ‘I can change. I can change,’ but I didn’t believe him. I closed the door, went to the living room, and watched him walk away—pulling his silly red wagon.”

As she restarted the U-Haul, Marion noticed movement in her side-view mirror. She squinted. A portly man, unmistakably Abraham, pulled a red Radio Flyer. It was Monday, after all.

She felt she knew him, this generous man who honored his mother. His effort to communicate with Isabelle, to reach out as one reader to another, was a potent act of love. But it failed. Isabelle never mentioned him again.

Marion shed her first tear since the funeral. Isabelle had no idea what she’d squandered. She needn’t have died alone.

Marion assumed Abraham stopped writing the undated book reviews months ago. Would he even know of Isabelle's illness, and passing? The truck idled. She took her hands off the wheel and clenched her fingers in her lap. "What if he doesn't know?"

She watched Abraham refill Little Free Libraries. He approached the unit Isabelle built, opened the latch and placed two books inside—but his deliveries were likely independent of whoever occupied a particular home.

Abraham lifted a third volume from his wagon. *The Testaments* was written in large, clear letters. He opened the book and removed a scrawled sheet of blue-lined paper from his jacket pocket.

"No, no, no, no, no," Marion whispered, grateful that nine hundred hedgehogs, in the back of the truck, were shielded from this heartbreak.

Abraham glanced toward the small, tidy home, and did a double take. His shoulders fell, due to the missing drapery, Marion guessed, and the barrenness visible within.

"Oh, Abraham," she gasped, breathless, tearful. "You don't even know."

He turned to face Marion's U-Haul. She cut the engine and slumped onto the seat, curling into invisibility.

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