THUS EVER TURNING
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In the summer, when the days are long and the hot sun beats down and everything metal burns your skin like fire when you touch it, we walk to the library.

The library is cool and quiet, and we could read for hours. It is an escape from our boiling house, which has no air conditioning. We open the windows in case any breezes have decided to drop by, but flies and mosquitoes are the only things that venture through the broken screens.

“The original Dracula,” my brother Charlie used to call them. There are none in the library. There are only comfortable couches stiff with newness, and lights that don’t flicker, and librarians who don’t care how long you stay and read.

We don’t have many books at home. A dog-eared Bible we got secondhand, which has the history of a family named Garrett scrawled in the “Records” section, so that Charlie couldn’t write in our own family history. There’s a fat dictionary so heavy that it’s seldom dragged down from its place on the shelf above my mattress. And there’s a set of all Charles Dickens’ novels which Charlie had begged my father to buy from a garage sale. I doubt that anyone has touched those books but Charlie - he wanted to read them all after he read A Tale of Two Cities, and I think he did, before he left. They sit stacked on his shelf now, twenty-two of them, collecting dust and fading more with every trip the sunlight takes across that wall.

But in the library, the books are clean, and they smell new and fresh, or old and wise.

“Brand-new ideas that could shake the world, next to ancient theories that changed their times.” That’s how Charlie described the library.
On a Thursday afternoon in early August, I browsed through the stacks languidly, letting my skin cool from the heat. An old volume titled *Selected Poems* jumped out at me. Vague, I thought, but I took it down, tucked it under my arm, and walked back to the children’s section, where the twins were engrossed in volumes of the old *Hardy Boys* books. I sat down next to them, and pulled my legs up onto the couch. They barely glanced at me. Lucy continued flipping her long smooth ponytail back and forth over her shoulder, and James sucked on his shirt, his nose pressed deeper in the book than most people. He needed glasses, but we were waiting till we had enough money to buy them, because we had had to spend most of what Dad made the month before on Charlie’s plane trip to New York and some money to help him pay his first rent.

“It’s the beginning,” Mom said. “It will get easier eventually.”

Maybe it would get easier for us to make ends meet. I wondered if it would get easier to have Charlie gone. Does separation get easier the longer he’s away?

I remembered the carnival Charlie and I had gone to that last Saturday in July. We had bought warm funnel cakes with powdered sugar and crisp strawberries, and hamburgers that were more char than meat, and blue raspberry popsicles that turned our lips and tongues brilliant blue. The sun was scorching that day and we had kept our baseball caps on so we wouldn’t get sunburnt, but then it had set in a blaze of flame and the bright lights of the Ferris wheel had glowed vividly in the twilight. We handed the operator our tickets and climbed into the unsteady box - Charlie on one bench, I on the other.

The wheel began to turn, and I slid excitedly to one side of the box to watch our neighborhood grow both larger and smaller as we rose. In the west, the sky was turning purple,
and our city was spread out under our feet like the play-rug of a gigantic child, sparkling in a million different places with the little lights of his shining toys.

“There’s our house,” I said to Charlie, leaning out and pointing at the flickering orange light that hung by our front door. “That raggedy old light that somehow hasn’t burnt out yet.”

Charlie looked over at it disinterestedly. “So small,” he said, a finger slipping down his chin. “But I’ll miss it.”

“You don’t have to leave,” I said. “You don’t have to move to New York to get a good job. There are opportunities here.”

Charlie shook his head. “Not in this small town.” He stretched out his arms and flung them over the side of the box as we began to descend. “Plus, I need space. I need to think my own thoughts. I need to start becoming bigger inside.” He gestured at the world below us, which we were fast falling towards. “There’s so much besides this, Ann my man, and I want to start seeing it.”

“I just don’t want you to go,” I said softly. I had turned and looked down as we began to rise again, and had felt suddenly the fragility of the world - on a whim, the Titan child could pick up his rug, shake it out, and roll it up and put it away, along with all his sparkling toys. The smell of funnel-cakes and hot dogs and the sounds of laughter and tinny classic tunes would be gone, and there would be nothing left but the darkening purple sky.

And now, just as easily, a part of my life had been rolled up and stowed away. There was an empty bed in our bedroom, and a missing person at our small wobbly dinner table. We smiled, because he was moving to a future that was brighter than he could have here. But I missed the brother who used to drive down the empty streets with me on summer nights, blaring last year’s
pop hits with all the windows down, singing and dancing so recklessly that I always had one hand out, ready to grab the steering wheel. I missed him most because when he called us, I didn’t talk to the Charlie I used to know. It was someone different, someone whose stories were of people I’d never met and places I’d never been. A Charlie who didn’t know me anymore.

I opened *Selected Poems* before I could think about it too much. The words were smudged by time and coffee, and the yellowing pages were stiff when I turned them. The twins had books piled next to them, ready to read when they had finished their current volumes. The only sounds were the turning of pages and Lucy’s ponytail flipping back and forth, and the occasional snap of James’ shirt slipping out of his mouth.

We read as the sliding sun made our pages blaze like flame, and then slipped down below the horizon until it was so dark out that we could see nothing through the windows, only our own reflections looking back at us. The librarian announced closing time, so we collected our books and checked them out at the counter. The world was still glowing with the last remnants of the day’s heat as we stepped out into the warm blue dusk, and the streetlamps reddied the concrete.

“I wish we had a swimming pool,” James said as the shouts of a party floated over a backyard fence. “We could have so much fun in the summer.”

“We should make one!” Lucy said. “We could have it all ready when Charlie comes back!”

“Maybe,” James muttered. He looked up at me as we crossed a small street, our flopping sandals sending the gravel skittering into the street drains. “Ann, when *is* Charlie coming home?”
A man trundling his ice-cream cart home passed us and saluted playfully. The cart’s little jingle played out into the evening, sounding happily weary and content. Charlie and I would always run to get Neapolitan sandwiches whenever we heard that.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“Is he coming back?” Lucy asked, sucking on the tip of her ponytail.

I could remember saying goodbye to him at the airport in the raw, chilly dawn. Not knowing when I’d see him again. His dingy black suitcase next to him, his eyes wide and awake but already distant, already looking towards New York. We were running late for his flight, and he gave each of us quick hugs.

“Read A Tale of Two Cities,” he told me as he hugged me. And that was the last thing he had said before he grabbed his suitcase and ran off to chase after his new life.

“I don’t know, Lucy,” I sighed, messing with her ponytail. “People grow up, you know, and they move away.”

We stepped up onto our stained concrete porch, and I smelled pasta boiling as I opened the door. The radio was playing in the kitchen, the radio announcer talking more loudly than Mom and Dad.

“We’re back!” James shouted. “We got more Hardy Boys books!”

I said hello to Mom and Dad as I stepped through the kitchen and pulled out my book. They were busy checking the noodles and looking at the books Lucy and James had brought back, and I was still thinking too much about that chair that was pushed in the corner, the chair Charlie used to sit in.
I left my bookbag in the kitchen and went into the dark bedroom. Charlie had slept here too, before he left me with just the twins, who would only stop talking at night if Charlie told them to. I stood for a few minutes in the darkness, thinking about how his simple “Shh!” could silence them, and then I flipped on the light switch.

I flopped onto my mattress with my book of poems, but I didn’t feel like puzzling out the meaning of any of the verses. My eyes roamed past the window, where the leaves on the tree outside were beginning to flame at the edges, hanging from the limbs by a thread. My vision came to rest on the sun-faded Dickens books on the shelf above Charlie’s bed. Read A Tale of Two Cities, I thought. What sort of a goodbye is that? People move on - and yet, family never stops being family. Do they?

I let the poetry book fall closed as I reached across Charlie’s bed and pulled down A Tale of Two Cities. It was on the top shelf, the book Charlie loved best, and its pages, though brown, were soft as I opened the book. My eyes fell on the first line: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness…”

I blinked rapidly as I read that, trying not to read it in Charlie’s voice. I began to flip through the pages indifferently. Whatever this is describing, I thought, it sounds a hell of a lot like life. The best things happen so fast that you don’t even realize it till they’re gone. And then the worst things hurt so deeply that you don’t think it can ever be as good again.

I was stopped halfway through the book by an envelope stuck between two pages. I paused in my melancholy train of thought and tilted my head as I drew it out and flipped it over. My nickname was written across it in Charlie’s large print: “Ann my Man.”
He had always called me that, especially when we were doing chores around the house together. Into my mind flashed the last time we did dishes before he left, with him standing at the sink flinging water from the dishtowel onto me and saying, “I’m going to miss teasing you, Ann my man…” And then the next day he was absently saying goodbye and getting onto the plane.

I slid my finger under the flap of the envelope and tore it open. Inside was a piece of notebook paper, and I unfolded it carefully and slowly deciphered the words Charlie had scrawled on it:

Dear Ann my man,

So, I know that once I get to New York, I might not call you as much as I want to. I’ll have so many grown-up responsibilities. Of course, I’m not quite done growing up yet. But you never really grow up, I think. You can never get up in the morning and say, “I’m ready for anything the world could throw at me today!” Because you never are. This move - it’s a bigger change than most. But changing happens every day, even if we can’t see it. We keep becoming bigger inside, somehow. So I want you to keep changing too. We’re going to miss each other and it’ll be hard. But we shouldn’t just try to hold on and stay the same people we were before I left. It’s never going to be quite the same, even when I come and visit. So don’t stay the same person. The Ferris wheel keeps on turning, Ann my man, and you’ve got to just keep looking over the edge, and watch the world growing both bigger and smaller.

I love you, Ann. And I’ll miss you.

Charlie
I was crying. I lifted up my hand and wiped my eyes, sniffing and thinking of the Ferris wheel ride. The older I got, the larger and more complex the world grew, but it also grew smaller, like a house grows small and familiar and dear when you’ve lived in it a long time. Everything went on ever turning and changing in the big complicated mess of life. But some things had always been and ever would be, like Charlie calling me by my nickname. And I realized, for the first time, how very much I missed hearing him call me Ann my man.

I walked into the kitchen, where Mom was draining the pasta into our cracked sink.

“Mom,” I said, “I want to call Charlie.”

“Make it quick,” she said as she put the pot back on the stove. “We’re just about to have dinner.”

“I will,” I said, taking the phone. “I just want to tell him that I miss him.”

I dialed the number that I knew by heart as I walked back into our bedroom, and, as the line began to ring, I slipped Charlie’s letter between the pages of the book to hold my place. I wanted to begin to read on the first page. And I wanted Charlie's letter to be waiting for me.