

The Library of Seasons

For a moment, you stand outside. The humble, squared structure of the library betrays nothing of what waits within. The stone walls aren't pocked or chipped. Their flawless surface is a vertical alabaster sky. The windows are open and welcoming, but oddly opaque. A smile quirks your lips as you feel the windows are being coy in encouraging you to step in to see the inside. Well then, that's what you'll do.

The doors, huge lacquer pages, slide into the walls at your approach. The Victorian pattern of the doors somehow fit perfectly with the present-day automation, libraries are timeless that way. Your first step pauses mid-threshold when a cold blast of air brushes past you as it exits. Any assumption of air conditioners running at full power is cast aside when you see that the library opens into winter.

Perhaps you thought spring would be first, but having winter to greet you is comforting. The air is crisp but cozy, quickly settling to a temperature that doesn't require an extra layer without losing the minty quality of a frozen day. The floor is blanketed in soft, carpet the color of salt that gives your gait a bounce. As much as you appreciate the setting being set, you're here for books and you can't wait another moment.

The winter stacks climb towards the...ceiling? From your current vantage, you can't be sure a ceiling is there as the beyond the massive shelves appears to be naught but a simple clear sky. The shelves are hearty and lined with robust books that could carry you away or hold open a door. Right away you see stories about family, struggle, and resilience.

Dickens' epic of suffering through the legal system rubs bindings with the work of Joyce Carol Oates. You see titles you love and those that have always remained a few spots down on your "to-be-read" list. Despite the frequency in which you see recognize winter's offerings to be morose or downright sad, being reminded that these stories make up part of our universal narrative heartens you.

You pluck a tome at random from the shelves, the spine filling your palm with at least six hundred pages. Running your fingers over the embossed lettering on the cover does half the work of your eyes in reading it. You recognize this title, a nearly annual offering from one of Japan's most popular authors. While you wouldn't expect a book that was published a few years go to be bound in leather with a kiss of yellowing the pages, maybe that's just how winter prefers to present it works.

Choosing a page at random, you've suddenly joined a character in the book as he paints a portrait. The author's depiction gives the impression this man is quite the talent, but fearing spoilers, you close it again. Maybe you'll take this one, but there's so much left to see. Noting its spot on the shelf, you bop your finger one last time against the spine as you move on.

Strolling down the aisle, you allow the books to blend into a papery of muted colors. Now a literary landscape lines your peripheral vision as you walk straight ahead, your vision both tunnel and vast. You allow yourself one skip, before your shy side needs to check around that no one was watching.

Turns out someone was, but it's not another patron. A chirp above your head draws your attention to one of winter's librarians. A squirrel the size of a pony hangs off a shelf a dozen feet up, one fore and one hind leg keeping them anchored while their other two limbs are grasping at volumes waiting to be shelved. Their russet fur flows gently in the fresh breeze with ear tufts quirking side to side in a curious tilt of their head. You allow one indulgent thought about how nice it would be to hug that bushy tail till your gaze is drawn to their eyes.

Round and open but with a fierce intelligence that calls to life stories you read as a kid where peaceful woodland animals in an abbey were forced to take up arms against an evil rat and his horde. The squirrel looks at you with these wonderful eyes and chirps once more.

You recognize it to be a friendly greeting rather than admonishment for skipping and bob your head in return. They break away long enough to shelve a book with graceful ease and then skitter down a few levels toward you. This time their chirp is a question. You thank them for their consideration but explain you've only just arrived and honestly aren't sure what you're looking for, but that you're having a great time looking.

The squirbrarian, a name you mash together in your head, finds the home for another book. They move to leave but stop and turn back to you once more. This time they really look, investigating your clothes, posture and, you'd even guess, your aura. Satisfied with what they find, the squirbrarian tosses you a book with their left hind leg.

Your heart skips a beat, momentarily aghast that anyone would throw a book, but your faith is restored as the winter wind takes hold. The book leaves the paw as if it were underwater, turning end over end at a lazy pace before coming to rest in your hands.

One look and the leather binding feels incredibly appropriate for this book. A classic story of four sisters finding their place in the world, this one doesn't just weigh in your hands, it pulls at you. You cradle it against your chest and look to the squirbrarian, but they're already gone. You can barely hear the sound of their nails against the wood a few rows over.

On such strong recommendation, you're tempted to sit crisscross applesauce right here and begin reading, but, much like Sebastian on his journey into *The Never-ending Story*, you have far yet to go.

The winter stacks stretch before you, unending as the longest night but with the deep compassionate warmth we can only feel when the days are at their coldest. While you don't suspect getting bored in winter, you can't deny a tiny fire of anticipation in knowing what is to come next.

As if the library heard your heart, winter gives way to spring. The carpet takes on a lush shag that spreads around your feet with each grazing step. The racks become willowy, almost perilous in their thin climb upward. The earthy color of the winter racks blends beautifully into a hazy tan speckled with green. The books on these shelves are as much growing out of their places as rested in them.

The light thins too, becoming the sharp radiance of a morning filled with possibility. For a moment you squint but, like the winter wind, it adjusts before your hand can shield your eyes. This angular shine ricochets off vibrant books of every color. This makes sense, you muse, as spring is the herald of color.

And fragrant too. Your nose comes to life with floral scents layered over rich notes of dirt. You've never enjoyed the scent of dirt before, but maybe that's because you never stopped to enjoy dirt. It's always been down and out of thought, but now you know the potential that dirt offers in the way of growth. How from dirt came both the lives that dreamed these stories and the pages they were inscribed upon. Now you are truly a fan of dirt.

One hand reaches out and takes hold of a nearby rack, pulling you from this pleasant sensory assault to observe what treasures spring holds. Of course, Anne of Green Gables is here. Never was a story more full of what wonders a growing life brings than this. Anne's life may have its sadness, but she didn't allow that to dampen her imaginative joy.

Your hand flutters from that title to the first in a famous trilogy of elves, men, dwarves, and lovely little hobbits. You don't see the following volumes here, but perhaps the second is better placed in summer and the last in autumn. You make a note to try and spot them when you get there.

You stop on another big book. While hundreds of pages make sense in the height of winter when there's little else to do but read another chapter, you didn't expect to find something quite so hefty in a time of beginnings. The cover is as green as Anne's gables but the town that claims the title is across the pond.

Middlemarch by George Eliot, which you know is a pen name for Mary Ann Evans, tells of a quaint little town in England and the people that call it home. This book is certainly full of beginnings as the characters meet one another in good and not-so-good ways. You figure this is a spring book on account of the pastoral setting and the ways so much that we come to know about how the world works can get its start in a small provincial town.

You may consider adding this to your acquisition from Winter, or perhaps you choose another so your pile doesn't take on too much a consistent theme. No matter your choice, there is much yet to see in spring.

On cue with that thought, a flower blooms at your feet. A stem wider than your thumb rises for between your toes and opens in a yawn of countless petals. While it may not be a rose, the color is certainly there. Instead of the velvety tear drops of their thorny cousin, these petals are long and squared off in rough edges.

At closer glance, you are both amazed and not. Why wouldn't a flower with these many petals serve as a card catalog in the library of spring? Printed with pistils all around the corolla are titles, authors, and even thematic suggestions. You wouldn't dream of plucking such a precious petal, but the moment your eyes settle on one in particular, it plucks itself.

Lifting the petal, you puzzle over the writing. You don't recognize this book or its writer. With a piece of the flower this close, you can appreciate the scent. The smell touches the outskirts of your nose, avoiding direct contact with your senses but keeping you bathed in a powdery glow.

Turning your head to get a better whiff, you find the smell gone altogether. You turn the other way and only then does it get stronger. With a step in that direction, you understand that this catalog flower guides you to the selected book by scent alone.

A dutiful follower, you weave between hedges of mystery novels and low shrubs of romance. Passing through a plain of scientific writings with an adventurous bent, the petal brings you a spiral stack bound in vines.

There at eye level is the book in question. Lifting it gently, you realize you knew this name all along. While some poets are best suited for days of darkness or the height of summer, this one is perfectly suited for spring. Standing before the shelf, the petal still gracing your nose, you read her poem titled *The Miracle of Morning*.

There's sadness, but plenty of hope in those words. You close it, noticing the colors of the winter racks in the space behind where the book sat. You return the poetry to its place and let an unusually long sigh punctuate the moment.

It's the delicate warmth of spring you like. Like your own skin, good spring warmth should be unnoticeable. But there's something to be said for the true heat that comes next. With this thought you look behind the shelf where you stand to see the power of summer looking back.

Each step toward these racks increases the heat. A prickle of sweat on your forehead marks your official entrance. Summer has greeted you but will now tone it down a bit so you

aren't dripping with sweat by the time you make it through. If only all summers were so considerate.

These shelves are wide, representing the expanse of a summer vacation where there's so much to see and do. Their color is a strong brown, solid and smooth. The books here are more colorful than the rainbows of spring, but in a different sense.

While winter may have its thoughtful, slow stories and spring is full of present experience, summer is a party. Thrillers are jostled together with happy-ending romances. Fantasy novels sit on either side of one quirky book of essays from a popular comedian. Westerns, nostalgic books from your youth, cozy mysteries and the occasional classic all catch your eye with a quick glance.

You feel like someone that has just won a minute of unlimited spending spree in a supermarket, your hands grabbing titles at random, a smile plastered on your face. Briefly, you're concerned about messing up the order, but something tells you summer doesn't have a specific shelving method. Here the books are where they should be, to be found when they're needed or stumbled upon. Much like how your own home in the summer often has a book by the coffee machine, one on the dresser and another tucked into the corner of a stair, here in the summer stacks, you can take it a bit easier.

Wait. What's that? Is someone cooking? Any other library you'd be alarmed, but here you get excited at the thought of turning the corner right into a cookout. Your anticipation is short-lived as that is exactly what happens.

Paneer skewers on a grill are what you smelled. The onions, tomatoes and peppers wafting around a haphazard array of lawn chairs in the center of six diagonal stacks pointing out in the shape a cartoon sun and its rays. There are a couple other people here. They look up and smile and return to their books, one turning the skewers without removing his eyes from a pocket paperback copy of a Stephen King novel.

You feel welcome, as if everyone in this group came upon this space in the same way. No one knows each other, but you all have at least one thing in common and that's all you need. Innate acceptance radiates from this sun circle.

With all the grace you can muster, considered the haul you've already acquired, you reach a low chair and plop down. One book slides out of the pile and onto the soft carpet the color of matcha. Perhaps that's a sign you should read this one first?

And it's about time too. This Pulitzer Prize winning story about an aging punk rocker and the people in her life has been on your radar for a while. The author is popular for the ways she plays with storytelling while injecting some humor to make the emotional connection that much deeper. Without any more hesitation, you dive in.

The pages fly by. You're reading with that carefree attitude that can only come from a summer day off. You aren't concerned with the time, how many pages are left in this chapter or whether you should get something to eat. Oh, how nice. One of the other readers has placed a skewer by your elbow with a glass of iced tea. They get it.

The food is nourishing and light, drink cool as it flows down your throat. You read until you feel a natural conclusion to the moment and slide the book closed, plucking a wild bookmark from the carpet to mark your place.

Looking around again at the stacks, you consider which of the many ways you should go. Maybe you'll find a book on personal development. You've often considered that maybe you should get better at managing your time or stop taking everything too seriously. It's nice to read helpful books by people who've been where you are. But, then again, this is a perfect day here in the summer section. Maybe you'll just close your eyes for a moment. Yes, maybe just a moment of silence before you continue.

(Moment of silence)

That's another nice thing about summers, they are for appreciating. You appreciate everything you've gotten to experience in the library of the seasons and, well, all in your life that has brought you to this moment of appreciation. It's great to do nothing but appreciate in summer.

And then there's the fact that summers tend to be short. Having found so many exciting books, had a cookout and sat doing nothing, you may be done with summer already. Autumn awaits, but, first one more adventure to cap off this season.

The reader one chair over, as if they were reading your mind, nods you toward an arching shelf. A complete half circle leaping from the floor and diving back down a dozen feet over. This gravity defying display of books has many volumes suspended upside down but still neatly in their unordered spot.

The reader hands you a spare tote for your haul and, bag bulging, you rush towards the arch. Why it's not only an arch, it's a tunnel! Books lining the interior lead you down a winding path. The names of McCafferey, Vonnegut, Munro, Erdrich, Wight, and Salzberg whiz by as your rush becomes a sprint.

Laughter bubbles as you continue down, feeling neither tired nor lost. A tunnel takes in you circles, up and down and all around. At one point you find yourself running backwards but still moving forward in the tunnel. Despite the books blurring by, you still manage to spot *The Two Towers* by JRR Tolkien, guess you were right about that one.

Up ahead, a soft light grows. Autumn is coming. Your pace slows in the same way summer begins to ease up as the days age. When you reach the exit, or is it entrance, you are once again strolling the way you did when you first entered winter.

Autumn is happy you're here.

The colors are robust. Tones that evoke an easy chair by the window. The stacks here are high and low. Some have grown tall but hang over to one side, keeping their offerings at eye level. Others are huddled up close to the ground. The carpet is firm, almost coarse but still yielding to make walking a pleasure.

The most noticeable part of autumn is the light. Overhead is soft darkness, but the entire section is lit by candles of all shapes and sizes. The flickering light has blended into an easy glow. You don't have to squint to see the books, thank goodness, you were always told as a kid that trying to read by dim light would hurt your eyes.

Approaching the stacks, you are delighted to find books that have remained on the orbit of your reading life so far. You've heard of these authors, names like Saunders and Ellman, but never had the chance to pick one up and give it try. You almost make a selection, when the candle next to the shelf burns out.

No, that's not quite right. This candle has melted quite low, its drippings an inverted crown, and seems to have snuffed itself just as something is peeking out of the wax. Naturally, it's a book. Neither gummy nor gunky, you're able to pull the book free in pristine condition. Good thing too because this copy of *Jane Eyre* is something to behold.

The page edges are metallic, giving off a shine in the surrounding candlelight that have lengthened their flames to account for the recent snuffing. The cover is solid, an understated blue with gold lettering for the title and author.

Jane's story takes her through the seasons as well, spending quite a bit of important moments in winter, but the conclusion giving the settled atmosphere of autumn. You aren't sure whether to call this a love story, but it's certainly a life story.

The book is at home in your hands, the reflection of oranges, yellows, reds, and violet lights the only thing keeping you from forgetting you're not at home too. The security of this moment fills you with Proustian memories of the year behind and somehow the year ahead.

While we may not know what happens after the season we're in, the life we've built until now provides a framework full of assurances and strengths. Like how *Jane Eyre* drew on what she knew from growing up with her selfish cousins and going to a difficult school to help her weather the tumult that came from being a governess for a most unusual man.

The candle that held the book has relit, burning with sugary flare of honey at your elbow. The scent is just as sweet, bringing your full attention to the front of your nose. Your breath there is cool, drawing in more of the candle with each inhale. You feel the aroma filled with

the light of the flame as it cycles through your body and back out your mouth, crashing against the cover of the Bronte book in a luminescent wave. Autumn has perfused you.

The connection to the section reminds you of the important relationships in your life. Those that have stood by you and laughed your same laugh. Roaming the stacks again now, you see your friends and loved ones in the books. Not their faces, but their spirit. They smile back at you through stories both perilous and reassuring. Your best friend takes on the form of an exciting new fantasy novel while your favored Uncle is there to be represented by the conclusion of Frodo's journey to destroy the One Ring.

You don't pick up any of these but do make notes to add some titles to your lists and check in friends that come to mind. Your path through the autumn shelves leads right to a real conversation piece. Up ahead, towering stacks hang, but the books aren't as secure as those you saw before. Instead, these are open with their pages falling out in a cascading flurry.

The stories intermingle as they swoosh and dive around toward the ground. You brush some from your shoulder and look to see how they settled into the autumn carpet. Any mild horror you might feel on seeing these books come apart only to be trampled by the likes of you is silenced as the fallen pages take on the look of the winter carpet from when you first arrived.

You walk out of the autumn section with one backwards glance, taking that last piece of the season within your memory as you plow ahead. Your tote bag would be overflowing if you didn't acquire a second somewhere. The weight of the books on your shoulders isn't a burden but a promise.

Before you is the check-out counter. Well, several check out counters. While you can certainly approach the helpful human librarian, there are also self-service options for those of us that have had enough mild chit chat and want to get back to our reading. No offense, fellow humans but sometimes it's book time.

The process is smooth and soon you're on your way out. The library of the seasons asserts itself firmly in your mind as somewhere you'll have to go again. There is so much you most certainly overlooked on this first trip.

But for now, you have business to attend. Your trip was invigorating but has left you pleasantly relaxed. Creating the perfect launch point to get carried away by words.

Maybe you'll start right here in the parking lot.