

She is the quiet one, always sitting in the back of the classroom, small face covered by her thick classic novels. Her straight black hair is cut jaw length, not long enough to hide her prominent cheekbones. Her glasses are thin and purple, and the lenses often reflect the pages of her books, concealing her slanted eyes from people's view.

She is always alone, without anyone to talk to, without anyone to walk home with. But she never seems lonely. She has her books, and she has the little world inside her head, the one she has created with ink letters and sheets of crinkled paper and the scent of dusty, yellowing books.

She seldom knows what's going on in her classes, or what's going on in the world at all.

Which is why she doesn't know that she is being watched, by a lanky boy in her biology class.

At the moment, the boy is stealing careful glances of her.

Her thin lips rustle like paper, silently mouthing the words of her book. From a distance, it almost looks like she is having a conversation with someone.

He observes her for a few more seconds before continuing to read his own book: Howard's End, by E.M. Forester.

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The first time he saw her was in ninth grade.

He was in the school library, wrestling with the printer that just wouldn't print his assignment. He turned around as soon as he was done, the freshly printed pages still hot in his hands.

His eyes caught sight of her at that very moment.

She was in the farthest corner of the room, curled up on a beanbag, blue earphones plugged in her ears. The book fit the spaces between her fingers perfectly, and it seemed as if she belonged in the book, rather than in the world they were in. She looked so different from the other students – so calm, so relaxed, so thoughtful. He stared at her for a while, thinking that her palms might feel like the paper in his hands, warm and smooth, with the fading scent of ink.

He couldn't get the image of the girl out of his head, even long after he walked out of the library.

And ever since then, he started looking for the girl wherever he went.

He caught sight of her a few more times, mostly at the library, and even found out that she was the silent girl in his biology class, the girl who everyone forgot about half of the time.

It took more than several months, however, for him to talk to the girl.

Before then, he had always been hesitant to walk up to her, especially when his friends were around, his friends who had labeled her the Silent Girl and occasionally commented on her creepy quietness.

But then, one day, she accidentally bumped into him in the hallway. She was holding two thick books that day, and her fringe was casting a light shade over her eyes, making it look as if she did not have any eyelashes. He felt like laughing out loud at that second, like thanking fate for the wonderful opportunity, when one of the books fell on his toe with a loud *thunk*.

The pain was terrible, and it almost felt as if his toenail had cracked open.

He had to bite his tongue not to swear.

However, his irritation soon melted away as he noticed that the girl was staring at him, her widened eyes startled and apologetic.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I'm so, so, so sorry."

Her voice was so small that it took him a while to understand what she had been saying.

He thought it was kind of cute. Without hesitation, he forced a smile.

"It's fine," he said, stooping down to pick up the book. His hands brushed past hers when he passed it to her, fingertips colliding at the center of the cover, on top of the red title. He opened his mouth, ready to laugh nervously, when his eyes caught sight of her hands.

The scene sent a spasm of chills down his spine.

It was not because they were ugly or strange.

Her hands were actually pretty, with long, slender fingers and small fingernails, the delicate veins gently pressing against her soft skin. Her palms were pale and smooth, the wrinkles so shallow that they were barely visible, and her fingertips were only slightly worn from dog-earring books and slipping bookmarks between the pages.

They were pretty hands, perfectly preserved in the state they were in at birth, like a fly in amber, a beautiful phrase in a book. They were hands that have run along the warm wood of bookshelves but not through the damp dirt of sandboxes, that have chosen to remain in between thin sheets of paper than slip into the gaps between people's fingers. They were hands of someone who hadn't lived. At least, in the real world.

The girl suddenly pulled her hands away, as if she noticed him staring.

He blinked, feeling dumb and embarrassed.

They remained staring awkwardly for a little while, until she dropped her eyes to her feet. Mumbling a barely audible "Thank you", she tightly coiled her arms around the books and slipped down the hallway. Her pale fingers looked like stripped bones against the dark covers of the novels.

And for some reason, the sight of her books made him angry.

He wanted to get rid of them, the objects that had made him interested in the girl in the first place. He wanted to tear them out of her hands and dump them in the trashcan. He wanted to listen to the pages crackle in pain as the fire consumed their body, to dunk them in water until the alphabets melted down into illegible splotches of ink.

He didn't exactly know why.

All he knew was that the sight of her books did not make him think of her peaceful expression or relaxed posture anymore. Instead, it made him think of the way she never spoke to anyone in school, the way her small eyes were always fixed on something that was not there, the way she always walked home alone, not accompanied by anyone. It was strange, why he would associate her love for books with these images. Why he was thinking badly about something he loved so much in the beginning.

He asked himself several times, but ended up without any answer.

He walked away as soon as the girl faded out of sight, his heels grinding angrily against the ground.

But then, there came a time when he finally got to understand ‘why’.

It was almost the end of the school year, and he had slipped out of his PE class to get some water. He was looking for his water bottle in his locker when he heard a voice from the other side.

He immediately knew it was her, and he froze in his seat. He couldn’t see her, but he could tell she was talking on the phone. He contemplated leaving, as he felt like a creep, yet he couldn’t find the bottle beneath the clutter of textbooks and sneakers and shoelaces.

By then, she started speaking again. Her voice was still calm and hushed, but it was much louder than how she usually spoke. Now that she was not whispering, he could hear that she had a nice voice; she was an alto, voice a little husky from lack of use, but cool and watery nonetheless.

“It’s okay, mom,” she said, laughing gently. “I know. I miss you. When will you come visit this time?”

There was a pause, which was not broken for quite a while.

The girl’s breathing got faster and faster during the time, each inhale and exhale getting more and more strained than before.

Finally, the quiet was broken by the girl’s answer. This time, all the laughter in her voice was gone.

“No, he’s gotten better now,” she said. She walked out from behind the lockers, and he quickly hid behind his locker door, feeling creepier than ever. He caught her fingering the light bruises on her cheekbone, the long, slender, strips of greenish yellow. “Everything’s fine. I’m sure.”

Another pause.

And then, a quiet, “I love you too.”

There was something in her voice that made his heart shiver painfully.

She remained still after the call, looking down at the screen of her cell phone. Without a sound, she slipped it back into her pocket and walked back to her class, continuously rubbing her eyes.

Later that day, he found her in the library again, reading a book as always.

Yet this time, it did not feel as if she belonged in the book, but as if she *wanted* to belong in there. A tangle of thin red veins was coating the whites of her eyes, which did not look calm and peaceful anymore, but desperate. There were two thin lines of dampness trailing down her cheeks, and yet no one was asking her what was wrong. Not the librarian, nor the other students. Not her parents. Or at least, not her mother.

She sniffed quietly, and turned to the next page.

She was reading Howard's End, by E.M. Forester.

He made a mental note of the name before walking out of the library.

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"Hi," he says.

She looks up. Her eyes widen a little bit, and she stiffens. Her lips move a little, but she doesn't say anything.

It's lunch break, and he had followed her into the library after spending his whole biology class staring at her. And, for the first time, he is having a conversation with her. *Trying* to have a conversation with her.

He swallows with some effort, hoping that things go well.

"Forester?" he asks.

"Oh," she looks down at her book. "Yes. It's—"

"Howard's End. I read that before. It's a good book. I liked—" He tries to think. He can only remember the frustration he had felt while he forced himself to read it, bored eyes carelessly jumping from one page to another. He clears his throat, "—I liked the, uh, characters. Very deep."

She stares. She smiles a little. A nice, shy smile, but it's evident that she feels awkward.

He clears his throat. "Uh," he scratches his head, "I was wondering why you never have lunch."

She shrugs. "I like reading."

"Oh." He pauses, trying to figure out what he should say. "You never get hungry?"

The girl blinks. She shrugs again. “I like reading,” she repeats.

Her grip tightens around the spine of the book, and he knows that she wants to continue reading. Suddenly urgent, he blurts out, “I need help with math.”

She blinks. Her slanted eyes widen. “Pardon?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I don’t understand math. I need help.”

Her eyes narrow with confusion. “I don’t think I can help. I’m taking geometry. You’re in pre-calc.”

He curses himself inside. He stares, at loss of words. He wants to beat himself to the inch of his life.

But then, she suddenly giggles. It’s soft and quiet, and it sounds nice, like the sound of pages flipping under his fingers.

“Not all Asians are good at math, you know,” she says.

He opens his mouth, yet he remains silent. He scratches his nose.

She smiles, and ties her hair into a tiny ponytail. “So you like Forester, don’t you?” she asks, standing up.

Inch of his life.

He clears his throat. “Yes. I like his books. They’re very – very deep.” He clears his throat. He is desperate to keep the conversation going. To see the girl smile for a bit more. His mind races. “Who’s your favorite character?”

“Margaret,” she answers, without hesitation. She runs a finger over the ‘r’ of Forester’. “You?”

She looks at him, as if she is waiting for him to answer.

His mind goes blank. “Uh, yeah, me too,” he laughs. He tries to sound casual, but his voice is strained. “But I like Howard more, you know?”

There is a pause, which seems like forever to him.

He thinks his heart skips a beat.

The girl continues to stare at him, batting her short eyelashes, thick eyebrows plowing shallow furrows in her forehead.

For a moment, he’s so afraid he might have said something wrong that he can barely breathe.

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‘But Howard is not a character.’

The phrase is dangling at the tip of her tongue when she notices the slight glimmer in his eyes. His eyes are large and long-lashed, and they are a pale green grey, the same shade of glossy lake pebbles. His upper teeth leave a neat row of dents in his chapped lower lip.

She stares blankly.

Suddenly, everything feels slow and heavy. The movement of the people around her. The stuffy air swirling in her lungs. The weight of her book, slowly slipping out of her loosening grip.

She wonders why she hasn’t noticed earlier. And yet, even though she has noticed now, she can hardly believe it.

Her mind races, reminding her of the truths she had always known, yet had always tried to reject.

Pages are too smooth and cold to replace human skin.

Printed words cannot replace spoken ones.

Books are not alive.

The library cannot be her Howard’s End.

But the boy can, because his words hold a certain human scent, a human sound, and because his eyes hold something so bright and warm, something that cannot be described with the mere combination of 26 alphabets. And she knows that this something is what she has always secretly sought, but pretended she didn’t, after she had realized her parents would not give it to her.

She swallows the whole phrase, and smiles. Her book slips out of her hand and falls against the floor with a slap, which echoes loudly, rattling her still-dreamy brains like a wake-up alarm.

“Yes, I like Howard too. A lot.”