

The Book of All Books

Once upon a time on the edge of town there lived an old librarian with a curious son named Pete who read everything and had several shelves of rare and worn books in his room. The old librarian would bring home books the library no longer needed, usually tattered, with tape on some pages, a loose spine, and a library check-out card in the back.

Pete enjoyed collecting books. He liked their smell, like dust and glue, and the feel of the thin paper between his fingers. The only problem was that the books his father brought home were always so old and falling apart. For once, he wanted a new book to add to his collection, one that wasn't scuffed and chewed up like the ones his father got from the library.

The old librarian knew of his son's wish, and since his birthday was coming up, he decided to get him something special. After his shift at the library was up, he headed into town to the big bookstore everyone was talking about, the one that also sold coffee and muffins.

As the old librarian was about to walk through the glass rotating door of the bookstore, he caught sight of another bookstore across the street with a banner across the front that read: Going Out of Business Sale!

Being poor, the old librarian loved sales. So he went inside the small bookstore and talked to the clerk, telling her about his son's love of books and reading, and asking for recommendations.

The bookstore clerk was a blind woman, and she led the old librarian directly to the back of the store, knocking her cane back and forth on the wooden floor. She pulled a thick red book from beneath a pile of other books and, after blowing the dust from the cover, handed it to the old librarian with a fiendish smile.

"But my son wants a *new* book," said the old librarian.

The blind woman tapped one of her long fingernails on the cover of the red book. "It is a new book. Every time you open it," she said.

The old librarian didn't understand what the woman meant, but he had to admit there was something about the book he liked. Anyway, the book was in good condition except for the dust. If he wiped it down it just might look new.

He bought the book for three dollars.

When he gave it to his son, he said, "The woman who sold it sold it to me said every time you open it it's a new book."

"What does that mean?" asked Pete.

Both of them shrugged.

The boy began reading the book that evening. It was a pirate story about a man who'd been wrongfully imprisoned, and planned to take revenge on his captors. When he could keep his eyes open no more, Pete marked his place with a bookmark and went to sleep.

The next morning he was eager to continue the story. When he opened the book he noticed something strange. He couldn't find his place. His bookmark was in the right place, but the words on the page were talking about two lovers who were forbidden to see each other, and were divided by a wall. In the scene he read, they were speaking in secret through a chink in the wall.

Pete didn't care for love stories. He flipped to the beginning of the book. There was no title page. No author. Only pages upon pages of this love story.

When he told his father about it, the old librarian opened the book for himself, and the first few pages described a spy, chief of British intelligence, who suspects that someone working for him is a Soviet mole.

The old librarian closed the book. "Well," he said, "It just means that once you start the book, you must finish it. Otherwise you'll always be starting a new one."

Pete was up to the challenge, and now he spent all his free time reading. Most of the time, he was able to get through the whole book in a day, but weekdays were tough. He would read during school, during lunch time, during recess. He tried reading during physical education class, but holding a book in his hand got him mercilessly pelted during dodge ball.

One night, Pete accidentally left the book open on his bedside table during the night. He woke up thirsty, drank a sip of water, and noticed something very odd: the pages of the book were blank. He flipped through the rest of the pages, all of them blank. The words had disappeared!

Then he saw something moving on the carpet. It was a line of ants, trailing all the way across his room and up the wall to his window sill and outside. But when Pete looked closer, he saw they weren't ants at all. They were words! Little letters all jumbled on top of each other.

"How did you get out?" Pete asked the letters.

He didn't know why he said it, because words couldn't talk. But to his surprise, the line of words on the floor arranged itself into words he could read: *We are going to find a story. Will be back soon.*

Surely this was a dream, thought Pete. And soon he fell back asleep.

The next morning, Pete opened the book, eager to see what kind of story the words had gone out and found. But to his horror, the pages of the book were still blank.

He cried to his father that the words had run away from home, and the old librarian sighed, wanting to say something that would ease his son's pain. "There are other books," he said.

"Not like this one!" said the boy. "They said they'd be back soon. What if something happened? What if they're in trouble?"

The old librarian considered this and said, "Words are wild things. They go where they will because nobody can make slaves of them."

"I don't want to make them my slaves," said Pete, holding up the book of blank pages, "But this is their home. I just want them to be happy."

His father said there was little they could do, but Pete simply couldn't accept that his words were gone. He would skip school and wander into town, asking everyone he saw if they'd seen his words.

Most people looked at him like he was a lunatic. Pete's grades began to suffer because he wasn't going to school, his appearance more frail, his eyes constantly bloodshot from lack of sleep. His father saw how much his son was suffering, so one Saturday he took him to the library to ask around about his missing words.

Everybody said no, sorry, they hadn't seen a line of moving words. Everybody except one man, who said, actually, he had seen something like that up on the 4th floor, although he thought it was just his medication.

Pete and his father rushed to the 4th floor. There were no people up there, only rows upon rows of lonely novels and story collections. Along the back wall, there were a few rooms where you could go and read. One of these rooms was shut, but they could hear a man's voice coming from the other side. They opened the door and found a bald-headed man sitting at a long table, leaning over a notepad and scribbling feverishly, speaking aloud the words he was writing.

On the other side of the long table was a glass case, like an aquarium, teeming with dark, squirming letters.

"You stole them!" shouted Pete.

The bald-headed man looked up, suddenly aware of their presence. "I stole nothing. These words came to me."

"They're mine. And you've been holding them hostage here against their will!"

The old librarian squeezed Pete's shoulder and said, "Remember what we talked about," as a reminder that words could not be anyone's property.

The bald man pointed at the aquarium. "See there? They are telling a story." The man went back to scrawling on his notepad. The mess of letters periodically formed words, but not in any logical way. *Inside*, they would spell, and a little later: *frequency*. Some words weren't even in English, like: *argento*, *wasser*, *beaucoup*, and *mariposa*.

The bald headed man was a philosopher, and he explained to them that he had a theory that the words had some hidden meaning. Or perhaps they were a code. Either way, he would record every word they gave him, then study his notes later. If he could crack the code, he would become famous. He even planned to write a paper about the experience and submit it to all the philosophy journals.

"Why would they have a code?" said Pete.

The philosopher looked at Pete as if he pitied him. "Because all words have hidden meanings," he said. "You just have to dig."

"Look mister, I just want my words back," said Pete.

"I'm sorry," said the philosopher, "That's simply out of the question. My work is too important."

Pete was just about to protest when the old librarian interrupted. "It seems," he said, "That both of you want to possess the same words."

They looked at him blankly.

"I propose a solution. Let's let the words decide where they will go."

Pete agreed. The philosopher did not. "Why would I let the words free?" he said.

"Because," said Pete, "They're my friends."

The old librarian put his hand on Pete's shoulder, and the philosopher saw in the boy's eyes, now welling up with tears, how much he loved his runaway words.

"Oh fine," said the philosopher. "Let them loose."

The old librarian dumped the letters out and they scattered like wild rice across the long table, where the empty aquarium sat on one end, and the blank book at the other.

The little black letters frenzied in all directions at first, like ants when their hill is demolished. But they quickly organized into a slithering line that extended out the door. That line branched into a thousand more lines, and each one of those crept up a shelf of books. Soon, Pete saw little black letters in the books on the shelf crawling out and joining ranks with the ever growing army of letters.

Eventually, all the words of all the books on the 4th floor had been recruited, and the dark lines grew thicker and darker, like black snakes.

The words flooded the halls and flowed down the stairway to the 3rd floor, then the 2nd, awaking the words in every book, calling them to join the charge.

Pete, his father, and the philosopher took the elevator down and escaped the library just before the black sea of words erupted from the front doors. Words spilled out onto the street and filed away in neat, organized lines.

The philosopher scribbled in his notepad as lines of words crept by him. "Follow me," he said, reading one of the lines. The philosopher beamed at Pete and his father, "Hey, they make sense now." With notepad in hand, the philosopher followed the line of words down a sidewalk and around a corner. Pete never heard from him again, but years later, his father would show him an article written about the living words, published in a reputable philosophy journal.

And so the words fled the library and never returned. All that was left were empty books.

Pete had hoped that by releasing the words they would come home to the book they came from. Pete kept the book, though, as a reminder of the amazing stories it used to tell him.

Every morning he would look inside the book, and every morning it was still blank. He left his window open, in hopes that some day the words might return.

Weeks went by. Then months. Pete wanted to read other books, but all the books in the library were blank, and they were too poor to buy books.

So he kept going back to the red book, hoping that when he opened it, a new story would be waiting for him, one that had never been told before.

A year went by, and still nobody in town had anything to read. Pete was sure that the words were gone forever. And he opened his book again, as if to will the words to appear.

But then something strange happened. Words did appear, not on the page, but in his head. He couldn't see them with his eyes, but he could feel them bubbling up inside him.

He had an idea for a story, a great story, one that had never been told, not even by the words that used to live in his book. His mind raced with ideas, and he almost heard a voice telling him what to write. He scrambled to find a pen, opened the empty red book to the first page, wrote,

Once upon a time...