

Like a Bird on a Wire by Gail Loon Lustig

Walking through the door of our new library diagonally across our road in Bellville, I would be overwhelmed by a sense of freedom, a feeling so foreign that it took me some time to work out just what to call it. I was twelve and a half and needed a place to be alone and search the world and its secrets which lurked in the thousands of books covered in plastic on the freshly sawn wooden shelves.

Home, on the corner opposite, the yellow brick wall of my father's surgery attached to our house with its red polished stoep and slatted roof, was a busy and unpredictable shelter. A wooden door that was never locked with its simple metal handle, separated my father's world from ours. It was there that he took care of a varied and colourful set of patients who'd wait patiently on either side of the nurse's reception area to be called in – Whites and Non-Whites. So it was, in the days of Apartheid.

The stories would filter through to the house with its dark passage at the end of which stood a grandfather clock given to us by my grandfather Isador which chimed away the hours and sounded its tune on the hour throughout the day. There was a fair amount of tension at home, mostly related to my father's crazy work schedule and demands on him as a general practitioner and the sense that he needed free reign to do just that.

In August 1964, the new public library opened its doors. It stood out in Coronation Ave, where we lived, for its simple design, the fresh look it presented, long windows, rectangular shape, fishpond in the front and a few steps leading up into the space of the actual library. There were several corners with comfortable chairs welcoming readers of all ages and friendly librarians who were perpetually opening and closing books, removing the cards, stamping them and handing them over to the book lenders with a smile. I would watch them at work, in awe at how they performed a banal act so expertly.

It was here that I discovered the magic of reading. It was as if the books were mine, ready to be picked up and carried in my bag, cross the street and within minutes reach my bedroom where I'd stack them on the chest of drawers next to my bed. I would greedily devour them, some with greater pleasure and interest than others. The barking of Jacques, the neighbour's white poodle, my sister's jumping on her bed as if it were a trampoline, receded into the background. I lay on my side, face to the wall, holding my book, turning the soft pages, chapter after chapter.

It is true to say that my love of books went far beyond the limited confines of growing up at home. I would hunt them out wherever I visited.

Visiting London for example, the bookshops afforded me overwhelming pleasure as I wandered the many aisles for hours, scanning the covers, checking out new authors and subjects and leaving with a bag so heavy that it left red marks on my fingers long before I reached the hotel.

Living in Israel hasn't really been the place for connecting to English books. They're too expensive and not really available and sadly, no libraries that compare to the treasure chests I grew up with.

Until a few months ago!

I discovered a new library where I have my own list of favourites, subjects ranging from history to gardening, art, medicine, English literature and full-length movies. All this from the brimming-with- variety subjects taught at the University of Tel Aviv. And all available to me digitally at home, for now, as a temporary staff worker at the Medical School where last year I ran an introductory course on Family Medicine for residents, I have been given the password to the internet library site which has no closing and opening hours, no 'book has been taken, sorry' announcement when I ask for one and gives me free access whenever I choose to browse! A veritable treat!

I am quite overcome by the pleasure I have of simply sitting on my new desk chair with wheels and a soft cushion for my neck, browsing from subject to subject soaking up topics, many new, but as many, seasoned and faithful to my concept of what I love doing most, reading what interests me. For the first time in my life, I feel spoilt and extremely privileged to be able to grab time for what it can be – the freedom to do what I want for as long as I choose to, without limits!

And why not end with a quote?

I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of a Library - Jorge Luis Borges
1899-1986

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