

Antique Shop for the Ages

by Sanzari Aranyak

The sign was barely legible, worn down by years of dust and rain. If she squinted from about two inches away, it read “An-ique Sh-p f-- th- Ag-s”. It swung in the afternoon sunlight, as she pushed open the cracked door. Tiny bells sang as she walked in. The smell was the first thing that hit her - musty, with an undertone of - was it roses?

The store was overflowing with items from every decade and every country, or so it seemed. She wandered in between the furniture (everything from ottomans to Indian mirror work) and the books (first edition copies to trade paperbacks), until a head popped out from a curtain between some racks of clothes she hadn't noticed before.

“Why, hello! It's been awhile since any young people have been in these parts!” A wizened old woman exclaimed, “Were you looking for anything in particular, dearie?”

“Oh! Hi! I wasn't sure if there was anyone here. The sign drew me in, I .”

“Ah. Well then, carry on. I'm just fixing some things in the back, don't mind me.” And with that, the head popped back behind the curtain.

She blinked in surprise. She didn't always mix well with old people, but there was something different about this woman. She fiddled with a tiny battered paperback copy of *Dracula* while she mused. *Should I wander or talk to her?* The old woman probably had scores of advice to be dealt out if needed. But did *she* need it?

Suddenly, a record screeched and music drifted through the curtain. She decided to go ahead and talk to the woman.

“Um, hello? Excuse me, miss?”

The music suddenly softened and the head popped out again. “Yes, dearie?”

“I’m Mira. What’s your name?”

The woman walked past the curtain to stand in front of her. “Call me Shefali,” she said with a smile, eyes crinkling behind her thick glasses.

Mira nodded quickly, before saying, “If you don’t mind me asking, how long have you owned this shop?” The book in her hands contracted as she squeezed it.

“Ah, well, that’s a long tale,” Shefali paused wistfully. “The short answer is about fifty years, but if you have the time for it, I can make us some chai and tell you the real story!” She clasped her hands in front of her and gazed at Mira, waiting.

The idea of talking with the woman was intriguing, but a thousand other chores and tasks sped through Mira’s mind - her checklist had only been about half full when she’d seen the shop from across the street. “Oh, well, I’m not sure if I can stay very long today, but I’ll have time if I come back tomorrow afternoon!”

The old woman thought for a moment. “That should work for me. It’s not as if I have hordes of people flooding the shop, after all.” She smiled with a glint in her eye, and went behind the curtain once more.

Mira stood there for a moment, then put *Dracula* away with the books on her way out the door, the music still ringing in her ears.

She didn’t make it back until the week after. When she did manage to find the store again, it looked different. The once old and dusty sign now read “Antique Shop for the Ages” in red barely dust covered letters. The door had no crack, and there were windchimes in the doorway

instead of bells. The store seemed to have undergone a makeover inside as well. It smelled like fresh lavender and was more carefully organized.

Although there was still everything from books to furniture, the things in this shop were *different*. They had an unfamiliar air to them, something Mira couldn't place. She looked around, overwhelmed. The shop she was inside now was bustling with activity. There were all sorts of people inspecting and buying things, and children wandering around.

Mira walked slowly through the aisles, noting all the changes she saw. When she got to the curtain where Shefali had been before, she was nowhere to be found. Spinning around, she looked for the old woman. She wasn't in sight! *Maybe she's just in some other secret backroom*, Mira thought. Frowning, she walked to the bookshelves to see if there was anything interesting. She had just found the tiny brand new paperback *Dracula* when she overheard an old couple talking to someone they addressed as Shefali. Mira whirled around. She saw the couple, but instead of the old woman she had met before, she saw a middle aged woman. Although she looked like she could easily be a younger relative, how often did relatives share the same name?

Mira waited until the old couple stopped talking to Shefali, then approached her. "Hi. Are you the owner of this store?" she asked with an awkward smile.

Shefali turned to her, eyes crinkling behind a thick pair of vintage frames. "Why yes, I am. Can I help you with something?"

Mira paused. What was it that she wanted to say? How did she ask someone why they weren't the 70 year old they had been last week? "Uh....I was just wondering, how long have you owned this store?"

If Shefali seemed taken aback by her forwardness, she didn't show it. "Hmm...well, let me think." She frowned, her hand at her chin. "I'd say I've had it for about twenty years at this point."

"Tw-twenty years?" Mira stammered.

Shefali looked at her. "Why, yes dear. I've been in this storefront for the past twenty years. Have I seen you here before?" She moved a few steps closer to Mira.

Mira took a quick step back. "Oh, no. I was just curious!" She shoved the paperback into Shefali's hands. "You've got a lovely shop!" She shouted back at her as she ran to the door, leaving Shefali staring after her.

Mira didn't go back until a few weeks later. She spent her time trying to figure out what exactly the "Antique Store for the Ages" was. She Googled it, and when nothing turned up but a brief mention in a newspaper from 15 years ago about an old Indian woman and "the shop at the heart of our downtown for longer than we can remember", she turned to the city archives. After a week of spending time after work digging through the newspaper clippings, town maps, and books, what she found didn't answer her questions. Shefali Gupta had been the owner of "Antique Shop for the Ages" since roughly the 1960s. The shop had been around since before then, but no one had written anything about it. It had remained open through recessions and wars, and in the 1980s it was renowned for having a collection that spanned continents and centuries. There was nothing written about it for the past decade.

When she had exhausted all known resources, she decided it was time to go back to the mysterious shop and see which version of Shefali would explain the mysteries.

This time, the shop was back to being faded and dusty. The letters on the sign were black, and read “An-ique Sh-p fo- th- Ages”. The crack in the door was smaller, and bells were singing as she opened the door. There were only one or two people inside, wandering through the crowded aisles. The fragrance of jasmine pervaded the air. Mira stopped quickly at the bookshelves to see if that same *Dracula* paperback was there (it was, pages yellowed and cover brittle) before rushing to the little curtained room near the back. When she stopped there, slightly breathless, she only had to wait for a moment before a wrinkled hand parted the curtains.

Mira burst into her prepared spiel. “Hi Shefali, I’m Mira. I’ve met you twice before, but I feel like you’d only remember one of those meetings.” She squeezed *Dracula* in her hands nervously while pacing. “You promised that you’d explain the story of your shop to me, and although I wasn’t sure of it then, I need to hear it now. I need to know what exactly this shop is, what *you* are!” She stopped, out of breath.

Shefali stared back at her before shaking herself. “Yes, yes, I think I remember meeting you once in the past.” She glanced at *Dracula*. “You shoved that book at me before you bolted.” Mira gulped. “I don’t remember promising to tell you my story,” she continued. “But if you’re as confused as you appear to be, I would assume some other version of me promised you a cup of chai and a chat.”

She looked around the shop before walking to the cash register at the front of the store and yelling, “Alright people, time to leave, I’m closing early tonight!” She waved the customers out, ignoring their muttering and reminding them that she opened early tomorrow morning as usual. Once the store was empty, she turned to Mira and gestured for her to follow as she walked back to the curtained room.

The room they were in was far larger than one would have thought, holding a small areas for cooking and sleeping, a dining table, and doors marked “Workroom”, “Bathroom”, and “Darkroom”. Shefali bustled about, making a pot of chai.

“Sit down, dear, sit down,” she hummed at Mira over her shoulder. Mira walked slowly to the table, and sat in one of the chairs to wait. She noticed a bowl of fresh jasmines at the center of the table, and other small bunches of the flower scattered throughout the room. When Shefali was done, she brought a tray with the cups of chai and some biscuits to the table.

“Now then.” She slid a cup to Mira. “Why don’t you enjoy some chai first and then we’ll get on with the story.”

Mira nodded, and drank some of the fragrant, perfectly sweetened tea. After they had both been drinking and eating for a few moments, Shefali began. “I am, as you know, Shefali. Shefali Gupta. I’ve been working in this shop since I was twenty. I didn’t apply for the job I got, I didn’t even know I wanted it at first!” she took a sip of chai and glanced up at Mira. “I wandered into this shop fifty years ago, looking for some furniture. I quickly fell in love with the place, and visited so often that I became friends with the owner. However, because I came back at about the same day every week, I didn’t notice anything different about the store. It wasn’t until I came in a day late that I noticed. It was more crowded than I had ever seen it before, and when I looked for the owner, I didn’t find her. Not until I had wandered around the store for quite a while and happened to overhear someone mention the owner. When I did see her, I was in for a shock!” Shefali smiled off into the distance, and Mira leaned forward, already knowing what would come next. “She was about forty years younger, but I could still tell it was her. I had much the same reaction you did, and ran out the door in shock. I didn’t even manage to speak to her!”

She chuckled. “But I came back on my usual day the next week and all was normal. She was a 75 year old woman again, and the old dusty shop was practically empty of customers. At that point, I demanded an explanation for what I had seen, and she just looked at me for a moment before bringing me to this room, and making me some hot cocoa. We talked long into the night, and I came to understand everything.”

Shefali looked Mira straight in the eyes now, a serious look on her face. “I’m making the same decision she made. I don’t know you as well as she knew me, but I can feel that you’re the one.”

“The one?” Mira repeated, not quite letting herself understand what the old woman was saying.

Shefali reached her hand across the table, and clasped Mira’s. “The one I explain everything to. The one who might choose to help.”

Mira looked at her in confusion. “W-Why?” She sputtered.

“You’ll understand.” Shefali said with a smile, then straightened her back and leaned forward. “Alright, so. This store ‘Antique Shop For The Ages’ has quite literally been here for the ages. All ages. From what I understand, we’ve been here for at least two centuries. Every owner is drawn to this store, and it is passed on when their connection finally wanes. My connection was strongest when I was twenty, but it’s fading rapidly.” She stopped and shook her head. “I’ve skipped ahead. Sorry. Essentially, this storefront exists in a unique time bubble. It doesn’t interact with the concept of time the way that you do. As the owner, time passes for me in a linear fashion. But the store...the store dances around time. It will show you a different part of the owner’s time period depending on the day. I’m not entirely sure which day is which, but I

know that I can see people for the first time when I'm thirty, then see them again when I'm fifty without them having aged at all." She looked at Mira. "Do you understand?"

Mira nodded slowly, still processing everything "I...I think I do. So this store will project a different time period onto a different day of my week, but as the owner you never feel the effects? It...it just seems like we're time travelers to you, doesn't it?"

Shefali looked up at the ceiling for a moment. "I suppose yes, in a way you are the time travelers in my life." she mused.

"But," Mira frowned. "Are you stuck in this shop for the rest of your life? Can you not travel? Even outside to the grocery store or the park?" Her tone had a slightly hysterical edge to it.

"Oh no dear, I can still leave and travel. Since life is normal for me, as long as I leave through the back door of the store, I will emerge into a normal world, and go about my business. I can't stay out for extended trips, but I can travel, even to other parts of the country." Shefali rested her head on her hands, "My one dissatisfaction is that this shop doesn't change positions in space the way it does positions in time. I can't suddenly start living in Zambia and bring the shop with me. I have to live here."

Mira looked at her in shock, hands tightening on her mug. "I don't understand. What could possibly be worth this much trouble?"

"Ah." Shefali studied her. "Now I think it's time for the final part."

She stood up abruptly and, gesturing for Mira to follow her, walked through the door labelled "workroom".

The room was bathed in a warm golden light. It was small, with tables full of various tools and odds and ends. One cabinet, however, stood apart from the rest in the back. Shefali went to it, and retrieved an old letter from inside. She handed it to Mira.

To those it may concern,

Welcome. You are part of the greatest quest in our world. You are the owner of this antique shop.

At the time of my writing this, we hold items from the 15th century. I'm sure that by the time you are reading this, we will hold far more. This store is a bubble. We've created it because we believe that knowledge and items from the past are worth preserving. It is your job to expand the collection, but also to protect it. The items in this shop are a record of human history. Treat them well.

Regards,

Tsigereda Hailu

After Mira finished, she stood there for a moment, thinking. "So." She turned to Shefali. "This antique store really is just an antique store, isn't it?"

Shefali laughed softly. "I suppose, at its core, it is. It's a living, breathing record of time. The owner lives out her life taking care of it, but the store itself jumps so that people can interact with the different parts of life, of history." She stared into Mira's eyes, almost passing judgement on her soul. "*That* is the reason for all of this. That's why I am content to live here. I am happy knowing that I am preserving parts of our history that won't always be protected. Do you understand?"

And for the first time in the past month, Mira understood.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them, she spoke. “I want to help.” She looked Shefali square in the face.

“That’s what I thought you’d say. It’s almost time. My connection with this store is fading.” Shefali cocked her head to the side and wrinkled her brow in thought. “Come and find me when the sign out front reads ‘A----- S--- f-- t-- A---’.” Mira nodded.

A year passed before the sign called Mira in. In the meantime, she stopped by the store once a week to help Shefali out and learn the tools of the trade. She always went at whim, and soon her life was peppering Shefali’s at all phases. When the time did come for her to own the store, she was ready. The collection had grown since she had first met Shefali, but she learned to understand its mysterious organizational patterns. Large parts of the collection stayed the same, including the battered paperback *Dracula*. It no longer lived on the shelf in the shop but stayed in her curtained room, a friend throughout time. When she finally opened the store, the freshly painted sign outside read “Antique Shop for the Ages”. The hordes of customers who walked in were greeted by bells ringing and the scent of moringa flowers, filling the small space.