

Anna Scott

## The Short Story Dispenser

I don't have a name. I don't really have a body, either. I'm mostly gears, ink cartridges, and rolls of paper that a librarian sporadically replaces through a little locked door on my back. I have a title, though: SHORT STORY DISPENSER, written in neat font at eye level. And a company that made me, although I don't remember being made very well. There was an idea of me first, I know, a rough concept. Some sketches and grant applications. Then lots of whirring as machines cut trees for paper and bent plastic into shape. A final polish and a cardboard box with foam packaging.

My first real memories are of the library. I remember arriving: the sound of scissors slicing through the tape, the collective 'ooh' emitting from the room.

"This is such a cute idea," a librarian said. "And students can submit their work online, right? I'm going to make a flyer for it."

They wheeled me to a sunny corner on the first floor, by the information desk and front door. The computers behind the desk whispered to each other. Computers stick together like that. They're surprisingly shy—they haven't been around long in the world of things—but think too highly of themselves. A bit aloof. They called out to me occasionally, at night or in the mid-afternoon when they weren't too busy—an electronic thrum that signaled friendly collegueship. A cordial hello. Not words exactly, more binary than that.

The books rarely addressed me directly. We lived apart from each other—I resided in my corner while they occupied the stacks beyond the front hallway. I could hear them constantly, though, a low murmur that ran through the library's ventilation system, rattled the windowpanes,

and stirred the afternoon dust. The library was theirs, although they shared it kindly with the students and study spaces. Books are usually kind like that, generous. They want to be opened and shared. It was difficult to pick out individual voices from my corner. I'd occasionally hear the brass timber of a Civil War history book, or the soft musings of a romance novel as they lay on the front desk, waiting to be checked out. They didn't pay much attention to me as the odd story-printing machine in the corner.

We both held a fondness for language, albeit in different ways. They loved language because they loved ideas. Books are full of thoughts and emotions—just open one up and listen closely. I love language because I love words. I love the way they move, how they sound, how they form on the page. Every letter, every punctuation mark bursts with kinetic energy. Look at the smooth roll of an “o” or the cleverness in a “w,” the sliver of a comma, or the finality of a period. I can feel the letters churn and rearrange themselves inside my circuit board as I print stories. From this chaotic, electronic mess emerges order. It's hard to describe, but I suppose it feels like some sort of birth—I'm often quite breathless after printing.

The students I interacted with also seemed to love language. At least, that's why I think they stopped for me. Most people passed without a second thought, but occasionally someone would stop and print a story. They'd stand there, shuffling their backpack or chatting with their friend as I obediently fulfilled their request. I liked to match the story to the person. Although the stories were pre-written in my database, I had full control over which one they got. It was nice to make someone smile. The thin paper slip would roll out slowly until, with my final bright *beep!*, they'd take their story.

Human hands are always softer than I expect them to be. After I finished printing, they fold the paper carefully, before putting it in their pocket or bag and walking away. I can feel the

folding and sense their pocket's darkness. There's no human equivalent for this sensation. When I print a story, I exist within the story's paper as well. It's like looking through a cracked mirror. I see everywhere at once: crumpled in a backpack under a textbook, stuffed in the librarian's junk drawer, taped to the freshman's dorm wall.

Objects understand this plurality well, at least the ones embedded with language. I can't speak for the chairs or doorframes. They operate on a different wavelength, through some inaudible hum. You can feel it sometimes, when the library is quiet, and the slant of afternoon light hits the carpet at the right angle. But anyways—us objects with language, we understand existing in different spaces at once. We're constantly being torn off, fractured, ripped somehow. Humans think they're different. They perceive themselves in one plane of being—you think exist here, now. But what about the rest of you? The cells you sloughed off while sleeping or your fingernail clippings in the trash can; these are still you. You exist in your words, too. Say something. Notice the air moving through your lungs. Watch your breath fill the space, the sound rippling out from your vocal cords. This is all you too.

I digress. For now, I live in the library. I watch the students shuffle by holding coffee cups and laptops. I note their sneakers changing to snow boots; boots becoming sandals. The library swells to capacity and empties, save the lone graduate student researching over the summer. It closes for a time for renovations. The books mutter about modernization, being uploaded to the cloud.

It was fall when she first approached me. The leaves floated in through the front door, sticking to shoes or slipping by on the wind. I didn't recognize the girl at first. I'd seen her around over the years, but she was just another student. Not someone who stood out much. Wore a lot of knit hats in the winter.

She was walking out the door when she paused and looked at me. Her hand rested on the handle. I straightened imperceptibly. Kids always seem scared to approach me for the first time, as if they're embarrassed. She printed out a story. I couldn't tell what she wanted. She looked too normal to be a science major, but not eclectic enough to be into philosophy or history. I gave her a funny story called "A Bunch of Early Mimosas," hoping she'd read it and want more. She barely looked at it before stuffing it into her pocket and walking away.

She read me later that night. Her string lights cast a yellow glow across the desk cluttered with scrap paper and felt-tipped pens. She smiled softly as she reached the final line and folded me into an envelope.

"She signed me 'Love,'" the handwritten letter next to me whispered. "I haven't been around for very long, but I think that's a good sign."

"Do you know where we're going?"

"The envelope says Maryland, wherever that is," the letter replied. Envelopes and letters are best friends, two halves of one whole.

He opened us a week later. He took the letter out first and read, turning it over in his hands. The room looked hazy as the sun streamed in through the window. Clothes were piled in heaps on the floor. He unfolded me carefully and smiled as he read, his green eyes glinting in the mid-morning light, before placing me in a box alongside the letter.

I watched the girl in the library from then on. She intrigued me; I'd never been sent by letter before. People mostly kept me for themselves. Sometimes parents would print me out as a souvenir for visiting the campus—I liked to give them stories about drunk college kids getting in trouble. The girl looked the same most days. She kept her headphones in and walked past

without recognizing me. I wished the boy hadn't put me away in a box. I wanted to see if he responded.

Midterm season came and went before the girl printed another story. It was late when she approached, the librarian just announced the building closed in thirty minutes. I gave her a slice-of-life story called "In Her Bubble," hoping to find my way into another letter. In the story, the protagonist returns to her children and husband after an early morning run—it's so simple and lovely. I felt the words emit a quiet glow as I printed it. She read it in the library this time, standing before me, her caramel-colored hair loosely framing her face. Her clear glasses reflected the fluorescent lighting. She smiled.

The boy beamed when he opened the letter. He read me first this time, his eyes turning glassy as they ran over my words. She'd written a note on the back and drawn a little tree with a smiley face. He laughed when he turned me over before leaning back, wiping his eyes on his flannel sleeve.

He called her a few days later. "I got your letter! It made my whole week, thank you."

A pause.

"I know, the story you put in there was great," he responded. "It made me so happy."

They talked for a while. I sat on the desk, face down.

"I'm coming home for Christmas soon—maybe I could see you then if you're not too busy? I mean, I'd love to hang out with you a bit. I haven't seen you since high school, wow."

He smiled as she responded. "Yes, definitely. I would love to go on a long walk with you in the woods, even if it is snowing and below freezing. Do you remember that one snowstorm we got caught in a couple years ago out there—it was you, me, and Gavi and Claire, I think? We were trying to go sledding or something?"

He taped me to his wall after he hung up the phone. I could see the space better from up here: the soccer poster tacked to the wall, a chrome watch resting on the bedside table, and a stack of National Geographic magazines in the corner. He sat on his desk below me, scribbling frantically on a piece of lined paper. Sending another letter.

It went like this for some time. The girl would come to the library, print a story. I gave her sweet ones, funny ones, ones with cute foxes wearing hats and going to school. He put me in a shoebox, along with the letters. Sometimes I'd stay on his desk as he wrote her another letter. After coming back from winter break, he called her more often. He'd talk about his day, how his club soccer team was doing. He told her about his family, his two dogs and older sister. He whispered secrets to her late at night when he was a little tipsy, talked about wanting to teach after college.

She visited in the spring. He stroked her hair in bed as a movie played off his laptop. The moon gleamed through his curtains, a pale sliver of light spilling onto his bookcase.

Students wore rainboots and tracked in mud in the library. I could feel the warm spring air hanging in the hallway. The books talked about the kids leaving and worried about water damage in the humidity. He packed his room one afternoon, breaking down furniture and putting clothes into cardboard boxes. "In Her Bubble" went in the shoebox with the rest of me, along with the girl's letters.

"I heard we're moving out west," a letter postmarked March 10<sup>th</sup> whispered.

"That's where she's going at least," another letter responded. "She wrote me in April— apparently she got a job as a consultant in Oregon and asked him to move out with her."

"Is he going to do it?" An early letter asked. "I mean, he's so young, he has so much life to live before settling down with a girl. It'd be a shame if he didn't have a little fun."

We stayed in the shoebox, presumably pushed under a bed or in the back of a closet. We could hear their voices talking about work or friends coming to visit. Orange fur drifted through the box's cracks. They named the cat Cheddar.

Another year of students filtered through the library. More people printed stories. A first year with purple hair used me for scrap paper, scribbling calculus on my back before recycling me. I gave a child a story about a goose, and he folded me into a paper crane.

Dust accumulated in the shoebox. The space around us grew quieter more often. Most evenings, the TV spluttered from another room, talking about sports and the weather. The cat coughed up a hairball close by; the boy muttered obscenities as he cleaned it up. The girl's voice sounded distant. She talked about new opportunities. Growing in different directions. Not knowing what she wanted. He talked about love, about figuring it out as they go. Being flexible. She didn't argue. He never yelled.

The boy opened the box one day. His face had grown scruffy. He thumbed through the letters and stories slowly, not reading any. The cat jumped into his lap and pushed his head under his hand.

"Don't worry Cheddar," he said. "No one's leaving you."

The cat settled in his lap, purring. He opened a letter, an early one from the fall. Her handwriting scrawled across the lined paper. She'd sketched a tree in the corner and its branches stretched across the page, reaching into her words. He folded the paper and put it back in the box. His eyes looked puffy in the dim lighting. I could hear his breath catch softly as he closed the lid.

Sometime in the future, he finds us again. We'd bounced around for a long time, moving from a dark closet corner to an under-bed space shared with childhood books with squeaky

voices to basement storage and holiday decorations. The lid opens, flooding the box with light. We squint, as old paper does.

“Aw,” he smiles, holding “In Her Bubble” to the light. He’s wearing glasses. “I forgot all about these.” He blows dust off the paper.

*She wipes her feet before opening the front door. The house’s silence has definitely vanished.* I’m giddy with excitement as he reads my old words again.

*The noise of the coffee maker, the news on the radio, the cat meowing. Upstairs, the baby howling.* The basement light flickers slightly. There’s a box labeled HENRY’S TOYS in the corner. *Her husband’s voice, tender and serious.*

He smiles as he reaches the story’s end. I hear a dog bark upstairs. *And this question from a five-year-old Spiderman gripping her in his spider arms, “Mommy? Where’ve you been, Mommy?”*

The boy returns me to the box, closing the lid. The letters sign and settle back into the darkness. I listen as he walks upstairs, calling out to someone.

The library looks mostly the same as it did. The carpet has faded a bit. The students come every fall and leave in the spring, bringing color and life to the building. The books grumble about technology and the computers whisper to each other. Librarians replace my ink cartridges. My button jams more, it’s sticky with age. People ask me for stories, and I print them out, filling the world with slips of paper, with words. I feel them rattle through my circuits, arranging, and rearranging themselves, forming something that’s almost living. Look! Watch as the letters meet your eyes and turn to electricity. Feel them zip through your brain’s neural pathways as you unravel their code. Pay attention. We’re not so different, you and I. We’re all sending love letters. We’re all writing stories. It’s in our wiring; we’re all finding meaning in it all.