



Image: Ho Lin

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Librarians in the Plague Year

The year the plague resurged, it moved slowly from the port city to the surrounding towns, but Lord Breval acted early. He gathered the members of his household, essentials and entertainments, and left the city of Pellerowe to wait it out deep in the country.

After the plague had reached towns fifty miles to the east and forty miles to the west of Pellerowe, Breval ordered his library moved. The library was private but open to the higher born members of the public, and with special permission to others, and was run by seven women who lived on the premises, Artemisia, Jacobina, Evanne, Isabel, Mazarine, Orinda, and Philippa. Breval had spent many years developing his library, and he was afraid that when people fled the city, the lawless who remained would use his books to start fires to burn the dead. The library was to be moved to a small estate in a remote, hilly location, with land good for little but growing mediocre grapes. In recent years, Breval had let the vineyards go fallow, and the estate had only one groundskeeper who lived there with his young son and who supported himself by farming a patch of land in the valley under the hill. Through proxy, Lord Breval hired a cook, four guardsmen, and six wagons with two horses each. The librarians loaded the wagons with as many books as they would hold then left the town on foot. More than half of the library

was left behind, but the journey's expense and the approaching plague meant that only one trip could be made.

On a bright morning in early May, they arrived at the estate house and were delivered to the groundskeeper. Breval's men rode away. The house was built halfway up a large hill, on a flat terrace. On one side of the grounds stood a small private chapel, and on the other, a large root cellar that had been empty for quite some time. The remains of a neglected garden stood at the entryway to the main house near a dry marble fountain containing a statue of Poseidon. Seven straw beds and a long table had been set up in the main hall, where the librarians were to eat and sleep.

Two full days were spent unloading the carts and arranging the books throughout the house. The house was not designed to be a library; books were laid out in wardrobes and in other cabinets, across the fireplace mantles, on tables, and on benches; trunks were dismantled so that both the container and lid could be filled. Even the buckets from several wine presses were filled with books. And though the house had its own private library, this room remained untouched to avoid confusing its books with those from the Pellerowe library. The groundskeeper's son was an enthusiastic helper during the unloading, but the groundskeeper himself, citing other duties, was absent from the labor.

After the books had all been stored throughout the house, the librarians set about cataloging what they had brought; each of the librarians was given a ledger book and assigned a room. At the end of the day, they gathered for the evening meal. The work was repetitive and undemanding, and their evenings were rescued from tedium by Mazarine, who discovered a small collection of musical instruments in the conservatory, and Jacobina, who came across a few puppets in one of the children's bedrooms. Not all of the librarians were well educated, but Mazarine and Orinda had some musical training and entertained the others with lute songs and plaintive melodies on the viola de gamba, while Philippa had a talent for improvising commedia dell'arte scenarios with the puppets.

During the first two weeks in the country, Jacobina was cheerful and diligent, as her work and the company of the other six women distracted her from the uncertainty of their situation. But as time wore on her cheerfulness subsided. The work became dull and she became impatient with the attention to detail it required. She began to doubt whether the books themselves had any real value at all; many were beyond her understanding and many seemed to be complete nonsense. She also noticed, looking out through the narrow windows of the house, that during the day, when they were supposed to be working, Evanne, Isabel, and Orinda were often outside, walking around the grounds, sitting on benches in the garden, and even, occasionally, throwing stones with the groundskeeper's son. Towards the end of the third week, she began looking for books that would interest her and spent much of the work days reading rather than filling out her ledger.

By the beginning of July, all of the librarians were showing signs of restlessness. They had not finished the inventory of Lord Breval's books. All had begun to question the value of the

work they were doing, and all were struggling to maintain their spirits. They had received no news from outside and did not know how the plague was progressing, or even if there would be anyone left alive to read any of the books they were half-heartedly cataloging. Then, on a particularly hot and muggy afternoon, the groundskeeper brought a letter to Artemisia which gave the news that Sir Gelfe, Lord Breval's main steward, would be visiting the house to evaluate the librarians' progress and to see if they required further supplies or assistance.

But it was nearly a month until Gelfe finally arrived. Yet perhaps because they were grateful that the work they were doing would soon be witnessed and appreciated, the librarians began to work more diligently. Jacobina spent less time reading and noticed that, except for Evanne, the other librarians were rarely on the lawn and in the gardens before evening.

Gelfe arrived in mid-August and was immediately housed in the chapel for the customary *quaranta giorni*. He was rather angry over his isolation. He claimed he had been travelling alone with little contact with anyone at all for at least that many days, but the groundskeeper, who served as liaison between the librarians and the steward, was unmovable. He brought food twice a day from the kitchen and left it outside the chapel. Gelfe was free to roam the grounds for one hour in the evening, but the house remained closed to him. For the first two weeks after his arrival, Artemisia visited Gelfe daily and spoke to him through the only open window in the chapel. As Artemisia stood at a fair distance from the window, both she and Gelfe had to shout to make themselves heard, and the librarians frequently could hear Artemisia's standard pleasantries and the increasingly angry responses from Gelfe. After one such exchange, Artemisia abruptly halted her visits.

Summer gave way to a temperate, dry autumn. The air in the house became more pleasant, and with the waning summer light, the work days grew shorter. Finally, Gelfe was released from isolation, brought into the house, and given quarters in a room down a long corridor from the main hall. Once he was settled, Artemisia led him on a tour. Clearly in a foul mood, Gelfe was tensely quiet, but at the tour's end, he said to Artemisia, "Madam, your industry is matched only by your complacency. I am amazed by how your work has expanded to fill the time you have spent." Gelfe believed he possessed a sharp wit and that his cleverness would endear him to the people he insulted.

"It can be difficult to be industrious, when the future we all face is so uncertain," Artemisia said.

After the tour, Gelfe retired to his quarters and requested a private meeting with Evanne. If the other librarians assumed that she was being remonstrated for the lack of seriousness she applied to her work, they were disappointed. Gelfe stayed in his room for two days and met privately with Evanne three times during that period. Each time Evanne emerged from the meeting not humbled but rather bearing a haughty, confident air.

On the third day after he took his quarters, Gelfe wandered silently through the halls and rooms, observing the librarians as they worked. Artemisia could feel a cloud of resentment surrounding the man and wondered if the other women could feel it as well. When he stepped

into the house's private library and saw that none of the librarians were working there, he strode quickly down the hallway and instructed the nearest librarian to have Artemisia come to his room at once. She did, and found him, back to her, looking out the window onto the fallow vineyards.

"May I ask why, in the only room in this house that is an actual library, no work has been done?" he said without turning around.

"That is the estate's library," said Artemisia. "It's not part of the collection from Pellerowe."

Gelfe turned slowly from the window.

"Are not all of the books part of Lord Breval's collections?" he said.

"Yes, but the books in this library will be staying here," she said.

"You are in the employ of Lord Breval, aren't you?" said Gelfe.

"Yes, sir," said Artemisia.

"It seems to me that this is an opportunity," said Gelfe. "You are librarians. The house has a library. Lord Breval would no doubt appreciate the personal attention you could bring to the books of this house as well as those in the Pellerowe library. The distinction strikes me as arbitrary. What else do you have to do with the time given to you in the country?"

"Sir, it'll just create confusion," said Artemisia, "having indices for books that we won't be bringing back with us once the plague has subsided. We've nearly finished cataloging all of the material we brought here in May, and there is still a lot of work to be done on it. Perhaps we could wait until that work is finished?"

"You have enough librarians to do it now," said Gelfe.

He refused to discuss the matter further and ordered Artemisia out of his room.

That evening at supper, Artemisia spoke privately to Jacobina and related the conversation.

"It's not an unreasonable request," said Jacobina.

"It's a demand that stems from ignorance," said Artemisia. "Gelfe is not a scholar, he's a glorified clerk. He has an idea of thoroughness that is counterproductive."

Jacobina volunteered to take the task on, but Artemisia said she would rather assign it to Evanne.

With the cataloging of the books nearing completion, Artemisia set out to organize their arrangement within the house. The groundskeeper collected several small bookcases from the private library and fixed wheels to them, and the librarians began the deliberate and laborious process of moving the books to match as closely as possible, their positions in the original library. Evanne, nominally occupied in the cataloging of the estate's library, did not participate in this work, and in fact often seemed to spend as much time gathering mushrooms for the cook or weaving wreaths from the weeds growing wild in the vineyard as she spent in the library. Artemisia had not consulted Gelfe regarding this plan, and the librarians' actions did not please him.

“I thought the cataloging had been completed. Why all this extra activity?” he said to Artemisia with an abrupt tone.

“We’re attempting to match the arrangement of the books as they were in the original library. This will give us a good idea of what is missing, and, once we are allowed to return, will make repacking the carts quick and efficient.”

Gelfe stood for a long time watching the librarians moving through the house’s main hall, pushing little wheeled bookcases laden with books.

“Wouldn’t it be better to simply write down the location of each book? Make a cross index linking each title to its location.”

“That will make extra work in the end, when it comes to returning the books to the library,” said Artemisia.

“Nevertheless, that is how we will do it,” said Gelfe. “This level of activity is unhealthy for women, and the books will be damaged by moving them. If your plan was to duplicate the original library’s layout, you should have done that at the beginning of this little project. As it stands now, you will leave them as they are and create an index, a geographical index as it were, of each book’s location.”

“We’ve been managing this library for more than ten years together,” said Artemisia. “we know it intimately, and our expertise must count for something.”

“This library does not exist apart from Lord Breval,” said Gelfe. “It is an extension of his person as an arm or leg would be. And I am his representative here. Which means the library, while Lord Breval is absent, is an extension of me. The books will stay where they are.”

Artemisia believed she had no choice but to assent. However, even with her agreement, Gelfe felt he had not made his point strongly enough. He motioned to Jacobina to bring one of the wheeled bookcases over to where he was standing. When she did, he turned it upside down so that the wheels stood up towards the ceiling and smashed them with a chair.

Things proceeded normally for the next few days; Gelfe continued to take his supper in his quarters and had little contact with the librarians except for Evanne, with whom he continued to meet in private. Then one night he emerged and took a place at the head of the table. He spoke little but eyed the librarians with unsteady and darting looks as though he suspected them of some sort of criminal activity. After dinner, Orinda sang a song with Mazarine accompanying her on the lute, and Philippa performed a puppet show with Harlequin and Columbina which brought fits of laughter to the whole company, even Gelfe.

“I’m surprised you thought to bring entertainments with you,” he said at the end of the performance. “I would have thought that the books left no room for toys and trinkets.”

“The puppets and instruments were here at the house,” said Artemisia. “The music room supplied us, and the puppets were in storage and obviously haven’t been used for some time. We assumed they were bought for Lord Breval’s children, who are now all grown.”

“I see,” said Gelfe, then he left the hall abruptly and retired to his quarters.

The next morning, he gathered the librarians in the hall. He stood near the corridor that led to his quarters and spoke as an orator, loudly and aggressively.

“I understand that being able to entertain ourselves is an important balm in these trying times. If this were my house, I would have no trouble with your availing yourselves of the entertainment within it, but this is not my house. This is Lord Breval’s house. I am his steward and must look after his interests, as distant as those interests might seem now, and I must place those interests above those of the people who are proximate to me at the moment. I can’t afford to only consider today and tomorrow, I must cast my gaze over the long duration of our exile, which may last two or even three years. As such, I cannot allow you to use, without permission, any of the items in this house that are not absolutely needful. I’d suggest you make your own puppets, tell stories as they did in *The Decameron*, or sing songs a capella. It certainly will not make things easier for us now, but we will be able to return to Lord Breval with our consciences unstained.”

Two weeks passed. The air grew cold and crisp, and the gathering and preparation of firewood was added to the list of tasks that had to be completed regularly, a task from which Evanne was exempt. Long evenings without music or puppet shows passed in tedium, and under the arbitrary and uncharitable authority of Gelfe, the moods of the librarians worsened.

One day Artemisia heard shouting in the corridor leading to Gelfe’s quarters. She hurried to it and found Gelfe engaged in angry words with Isabel.

“This creature has insulted me!” Gelfe shouted as soon as he saw Artemisia.

“I’m sure whatever I’ve done was completely unintentional,” said Isabel.

“You made the sign of the horns at me. Don’t deny it!”

“Isabel, have you done this?” asked Artemisia, softly, trying to inject a calm and rational tone into the confrontation.

“I swear not,” said Isabel.

“It’s plain to me that not all of you appreciate your great good fortune,” said Gelfe. “You are all under the lord’s protection, you are here in a country house far from the plague with nothing to do but care for Lord Breval’s library and his good name, but still you complain, you steal, you shirk, and behave as though under no one’s obligation but your own. She must be confined. The root cellar will do.”

“Sir Gelfe,” said Artemisia, “that seems extreme.”

“Well, seems to you is irrelevant. The root cellar.”

Artemisia suspected that the authority wielded by Gelfe was a chimera. He had, after all, arrived alone with only his office and reputation, but she couldn’t defy him. She could sense authority flowing out from him to Lord Breval to the king, shepherded by the church, rippling through soldiers and guardsmen, a network that supported itself even if certain links were weak. If she defied him, she would be cutting them all off from that network, from its protection as well as from its abuses. The end result would be exile for all of them, perhaps even before the plague had subsided, and in that event, exile would be death. Isabel was sent to the root cellar. Artemisia

was able, though, to smuggle a few books to her from the house library, an action she considered to be a harmless rebellion.

A few days later, Evanne approached Artemisia and told her that Gelfe wanted to see her in private. Artemisia was afraid that her little kindnesses to Isabel had been discovered and that she was going to be punished, but this was not the case. Instead, Gelfe had several of the ledgers spread out over his desk and was making a list on a long sheet of paper.

“I’ve been reviewing the work that the librarians have done here, and most of it is quite good. I understand that we were not able to bring the complete library with us, and that a large amount of material was left behind. I also understand that there was no time to take proper care in what was brought here and what was left. In reviewing the ledgers that have been assembled by your company of librarians, I’ve noticed that a number of volumes are superfluous. These should be discarded. This will make the return journey easier, as we will have fewer volumes to pack and transport.”

Artemisia looked over the first few volumes on the list. They included:

De Historia Stirpium Commentarii Insignes, Fuchs

De Humani Corporis Fabrica, Vesalius

Artis Magnae Sive de Regulis Algebraicis, Cardano

“May I ask how you have arrived at the conclusion that these books are not worth keeping?” said Artemisia.

“Well, it’s not my decision,” said Gelfe. “The list was given to me by Lord Breval before I left him this summer.”

Artemisia knew that arguing with him would be pointless. Later that day, though, she met with the other librarians in the master bedroom, the farthest room from Gelfe’s quarters, and relayed to them what Gelfe had told her. She instructed the librarians to bring the books to her, however, not to discard them, and she spent the rest of the day exploring the house, looking for a place where she could hide them. She believed Gelfe was lying about receiving such orders from Lord Breval, but she couldn’t justify taking the trouble and expense to send a messenger to Breval in the middle of a plague to refute one lie. The main house was full of either books or provisions with no unused spaces. The chapel, however, had a small office to the left of the altar, and in it was a wardrobe with a key in its lock. For the next two weeks, Artemisia arrived early for Sunday worship, hurriedly placed the rescued volumes in the chapel office, then lingered after prayers so she could store them in the wardrobe. She told none of the other librarians what she was doing. She believed if she could keep her actions undiscovered, after they returned to Pellerowe, the network of authority would protect her.

A few days later, Jacobina saw Evanne emerging from Gelfe’s quarters. The haughty confidence she had shown when she first began meeting with him was gone, replaced by a worn, pinched expression. Jacobina asked her if anything was wrong, and she replied that she no longer wanted to meet with Gelfe in private but would give no reason. That afternoon, Artemisia and Evanne walked the grounds alone.

“Has he done or said anything inappropriate?” asked Artemisia.

“No,” said Evanne. “He just prattles on about things I don’t understand, but it makes me quite uncomfortable. I’m not sure why he wants an audience, and I’m not sure why it has to be me.”

“Have you expressed your misgivings to Sir Gelfe?”

“I suggested that it was selfish of me to take up his time, and that other librarians might be awarded the pleasure of his company as well. He asked me if I was loyal to the library or to Lord Breval.”

“That does seem to be a theme of his,” said Artemisia.

Artemisia then met with Sir Gelfe to request that he stop requiring Evanne to see him in private.

“She has no choice in the matter. She serves the lord, and I am his representative,” he said.

“Is it fair to demand that she meets with you against her will, when such meetings do nothing to conserve this library or aid it’s functioning?” said Artemisia.

“That question is not yours to ask,” said Gelfe. “The meetings will continue, or Evanne will be confined with Isabel.”

“No,” said Artemisia.

“No?”

“I won’t allow that. Confining Isabel was an injustice, and I won’t compound it by putting more women in the root cellar.”

“Again, that is not your decision. You are the oldest woman here, and the others look to you as a leader, but you have no official power. All of the librarians are equals under the law, and all are subject to me.”

“Nevertheless, we will not allow another confinement. I have acquiesced to all of your demands, even when they were unreasonable—”

“Unreasonable? You have fought every decision I’ve made for the good of the library. And it is NOT YOUR PLACE to decide what is reasonable and what is not!” Gelfe’s face was turning red. He stood as he spoke these last words and began to shout. Artemisia remained seated and tried to stay calm. For a few long moments, they looked at one another without moving. This matter wasn’t just one lie, Artemisia thought, and the situation had gotten bad enough to warrant contacting their patron.

“I will write a letter to Lord Breval,” she said at length. “I will explain the situation and ask for a decision. I ask that you do the same, giving your point of view as well. I will abide by his decision.”

Gelfe stared at Artemisia with mute fury. For a moment, she was afraid that he would bring down on her head one of the heavy ledgers lying on the desk, but he did not move. Finally, he sat down again and picked up a pen and a sheet of paper.

“Very well,” he said. “Have your letter to me today.”

Artemisia left his quarters and wandered far over the grounds, trying to calm down. She went from the chapel to the groundskeeper's house to the edge of the vineyards, where the local farmers were making cattle feed out of the tailings of the harvest. Finally, she returned to the house and, with an unsteady hand, wrote her letter.

The next day, the groundskeeper's son visited the neighboring estate and hired a plowman to travel to Lord Breval's country home with the correspondence.

For a week, Gelfe stayed in his quarters, took his meals there, and spoke to no one. Then one night, he appeared at supper and gathered the librarians close to him. He had a long roll of paper with a list of books on it, which he hung up on one of the support columns in the hall. Jacobina had time only to read the first few titles before Gelfe's voice distracted her.

On the Material Existence of the Human Soul, Elmore

The Law of God as Expressed in Nature, Voss

The Animal Nature of Human Expression, Gaddis

"This is a list of books that are in Lord Breval's library but were not rescued at the onset of the plague. These volumes are vital to the integrity of the library and must be retrieved. I have sent for armed guards to accompany the librarians who will make this trip, which must be accomplished immediately, before winter sets in and snow makes the road impassable. They will be here in less than two weeks. Artemisia and Evanne will travel to the city with the guards and a cart with two horses, retrieve the books, and return here as quickly as possible."

Artemisia's heart was pounding, and she felt light-headed. She knew then that Gelfe had not sent her letter and had not written to Lord Breval himself but had written directly to the mercenaries who were on their way. For a week, she was in a fog and often found herself unable to concentrate on her tasks. She noticed, too, that Evanne was in a similar state, but speaking with her would have been an acknowledgment of their fate, and she was not yet prepared to admit its inescapability. In the end, it was Evanne who made the first approach; one night she stole to Artemisia's bed and gently shook her shoulder. She put a finger over her lips and led Artemisia out of the room and down a corridor.

"We could kill him," she said abruptly.

"That would only make things worse for us," said Artemisia, after a long pause.

"He came here alone," said Evanne. "We could kill him, put his corpse on his horse, and send it away. Country roads can be dangerous, anything could happen."

Artemisia protested, but weakly. She realized as Evanne spoke that she sincerely hated Gelfe more than she had hated anyone in her life. As he was intentionally sending her and Evanne to their deaths, perhaps killing him would be an act of self-defense.

The next day, she procured two sharp knives from the kitchen. She met with the groundskeeper, and, telling him she was afraid that one of the librarians was pilfering supplies or valuables from the house and hiding them, convinced him to hand over one of the house's skeleton keys. That night, she and Evanne waited until everyone was asleep. Then they waited another hour, then another. Well past midnight, with the moon down and the house very dark,

they crept down the corridor, feeling their way along, to Gelfe's quarters. They unlocked the door, entered, closed the door behind themselves, and Artemisia lighted a candle. Gelfe was stretched out on the bed, sprawled a bit, his legs scissored apart, his left hand over his head, his right hand under the pillow. His chest was open to their knives. They took a step forward, then another, then they each looked into one another's eyes. They did not speak. Both knew their nerves had failed them. Artemisia blew out the candle, and they returned to their beds.

Three days later, guards arrived armed with swords, bows and daggers. They quartered their horses and spent the night in the chapel, away from the librarians. The next morning, they gathered provisions and prepared the horse drawn cart. Artemisia and Evanne packed essential clothing, pickled vegetables, salted meat, and a few books for the journey. On the fourth day of the second week of November, they set off for Pellerowe. None of them were seen again.

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