

By Ella Tait

A hidden cave appears in the rocky cliffs of the storefronts. Not a damp, empty cave, but a homely, inviting hole in the wall. My objective is clear: complete the collections. I am always playing with fate entering this bookworm's burrow, never quite knowing what will reveal itself. I rarely expect anything. I have learnt that expectations are useless here. What I need will be discovered in due course. Perhaps sought, perhaps unforeseen. Occasionally, nothing at all. Nevertheless, I return time and time again, the quest for completion waiting for none. I have become adept at scanning the shelves, searching for the missing puzzle pieces. There is nothing more electrifying than the prospect of a full set, ordered and tidy, each novel ready to be read cover to cover.

A stray Enid Blyton or Willard Price catches my eye if Lady Luck is with me that day. They hide in plain sight, nestled between weathered paperbacks and tattered hardcovers. Often the most thrilling finds are just out of reach, tucked away above the ravaged lower levels, neglected by other wandering eyes. For my height, I am grateful. I can spot what others before me have missed, and I reap the dusty rewards. Out comes the step-stool, courteous provider of precarious aid. Drowsy dust is awoken. 'Is it on your list?' it asks impatiently, in symphony with the straining planks beneath me. The volume is extracted from the snug embrace of those around it and eyed curiously. A Willard Price, one that I haven't got on my shelf at home. Oh, the exhilaration! Familiar faces stare back at me from the creased cover. My old friends, Hal and Roger Hunt, once again ready to tell me tales of their adventures, to entertain me with the idea of far off lands and perilous situations. I note the price, scrawled beautifully on the inside cover, and return to my search.

Once home from my mission, a hefty pile in my arms, I head up to my room ready to run away up the Amazon with the fearless brothers. They wait, though impatient. The books are carefully slotted into their rightful places, all except one. This, the most anticipated of the lot, is finally opened and the rustling of brittle pages begins. Gently, mind you. I don't need to add anything to their already aged faces. Dog ears dance along the borders, careless reminders of those before me. It has never crossed my mind that I am not the only one who travelled with the Hunts. Each story seems tailor made, for my eyes only. Perhaps that is the reason I can slip the next book off the shelf before the scattered light disappears completely.

'How do you sprint through like that?' I am asked, and cannot answer. The truth is, I don't know. I am simply keeping up with the breakneck pace at which Hal and Roger seem to get themselves into trouble. I have never been a troublesome child, and I owe this in part to feeling like I have lived many lives. I have been everywhere, been dangerous without being in danger, been adventurous without adventuring. Some would argue that I was missing out, sitting around the house with a book in hand instead of playing in the park. Be that as it

may, I wouldn't have been able to explore the Amazon rainforest, the Pacific Islands, or the African plains without these books. Where would my curious mind, my questioning spirit, my bizarre knowledge of exotic animals, have come from otherwise? It is rare to find a young child who could describe a capybara or a bird of paradise, simply from a few sentences in a book. These magical worlds in my head were so fortified by those stories that I can still clearly picture the places Hal and Roger explored, ten years later. If I ever need a place to hide, a place to explore, to learn, and feel at home, I know where to go.