

DIPTYQUE
PARIS

UNE
NUIT DE
CIRE ET
D'OR

Extraordinary adventures sometimes begin so simply that you would need very special eyes to see them, or very attentive hands to catch them. So open your eyes, you who seek adventure, and reach out your hand, for we are at the beginning of such an adventure. At the door, so to speak.

Léon, as he had done every morning for so many years, was preparing to open his bookshop. Most often, before sliding the key into the lock on the glass door, still rumpled with sleep, he would pick up a box of books left by a hasty delivery person, or this or that prospectus or paper envelope too big to fit in the mailbox. But that morning wasn't a morning like other mornings. For once, the doormat was bare, with the exception of a little pine cone that sat there as though waiting for him. Léon bent down and, without thinking, picked it up.



He had done the same thing hundreds of times on the forest trails of his childhood. He rolled the pine cone between his fingers and felt the familiar scales against the palm of his left hand. Not for a moment did he consider that the Boulevard Saint-Germain, right in the heart of Paris, wasn't exactly at the edge of a forest. Nor did it occur to him that he himself was at the edge of a tale even more magical than the ones read to him in the past.

No, that morning Léon wasn't thinking any of this. He simply took the pine cone and just as simply hung it on the Christmas tree that adorned the bookshop. Then he made himself a coffee: now the day could begin.

That morning, like every other morning, he had come to the bookshop through the Jardin des Plantes. He had strode at a leisurely pace beneath the great bare trees shaking in the wind, attentive to beings and things, happy to feel the chilly city emerging from the winter night and waking up with him. He had walked along the luxuriant jungle enclosed in its precious greenhouse, no matter the season. He had passed the serious park warden in his marine blue suit, had watched the neon joggers racing

down the garden paths, noted the dinosaurs looking through the windows of the Grande Galerie, crossed a mother and her son hurrying toward the last days of school, and other passersby seeking some missing gift, a dessert or a party surprise loaf. Even more than the night before, everyone seemed flushed with that mix of excitement and lightness that inhabits those who are anticipating a great event. Had someone turned on a microphone above the city to capture its general melody, they would have heard the busy, cheerful brouhaha of preparations for a feast. Lighting displays along the street twinkled with yellow and white impatience: the holidays were in full swing.

Léon was not immune to this joyous bustle: whistling a tune, he lit the scented candle on the oak counter and climbed the varnished steps of the great ladder to file away the newly received titles — big illustrated volumes as tart as candy, romance novels deliciously coated with sentimentality, art books with glossy pages — before sliding back down to arrange the display window, move some tinsel on the tree a few centimeters to the left, and

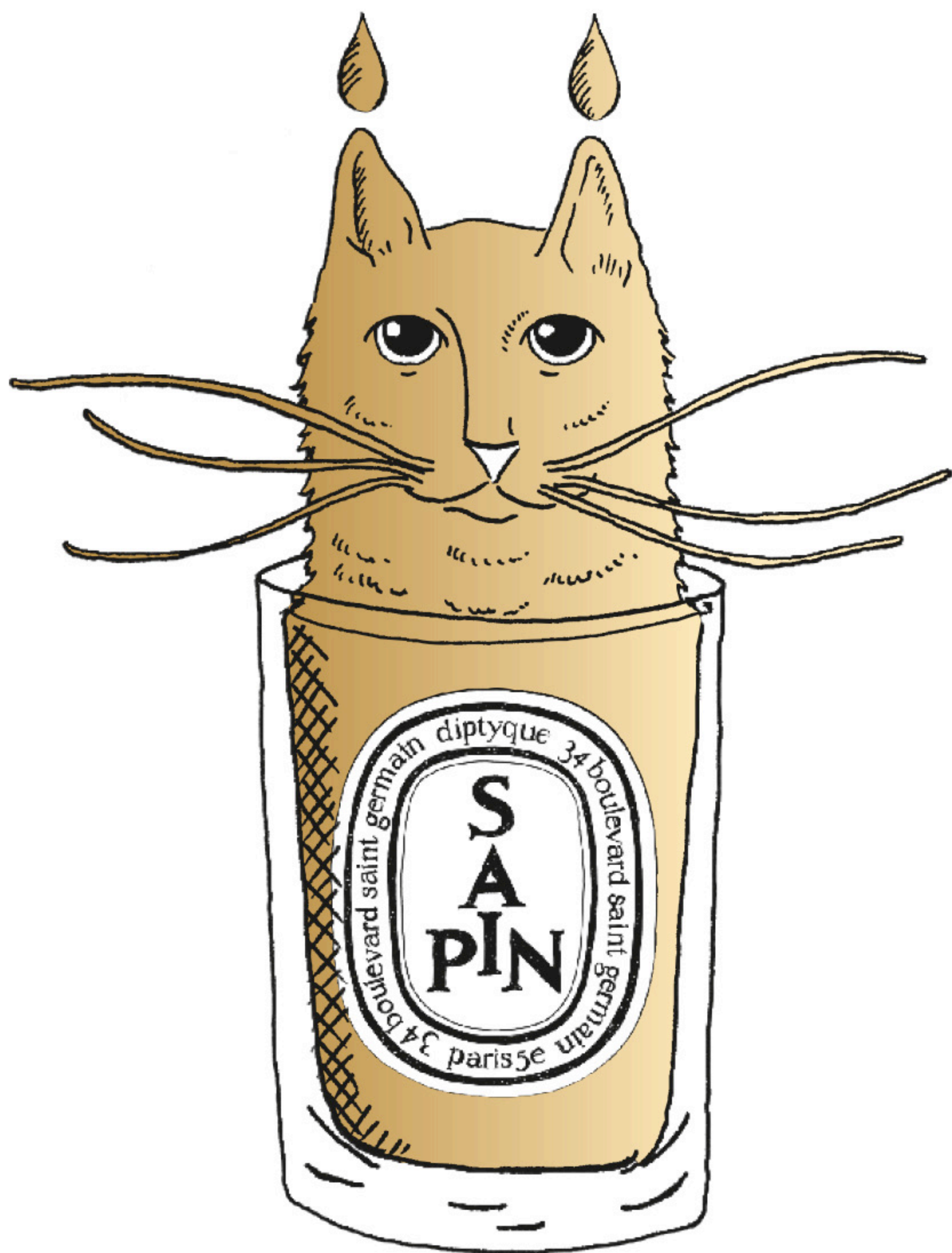
put his bookshop perfectly in order before the day's many visits came to restore a natural, festive chaos.

He was accompanied in all of this by an assistant who was discreet in size but ever so indispensable to the life of the bookshop. A companion with very confident literary tastes, sometimes stubborn in character but always willing to give advice — when he wasn't busy sleeping on top of the big radiator in the poetry section. This most excellent white-whiskered fellow was known, to his master, by the noble name of Archibald.

That day, the eminent Archibald was no less electrified by the festive ambiance that hovered in the air. Barely had Léon entered the bookshop when he darted between piles of books as fast as a speeding Parisian bicyclist, knocking over half a dozen of them on his way.

“Hello, Archie!” said Léon, unbothered. “What's new?”

Archibald's only reply was to lazily rub himself against Léon's legs and then, in three spectacular leaps, return to his radiator in the poetry section. This was his favorite spot, both the most comfortable and the one where he found the best literary company, between A as in Apollinaire and B as in Baudelaire — his two masters in poetry



and Parisian wanderings. From his perch, he could observe the customers at his pleasure as they roamed through the maze of books. He liked to watch the adults furrowing their brows while paging through thick essays with overlong titles, or children daydreaming over a book cover promising an ocean voyage or a knightly romance. Most often, Archibald refrained from addressing them directly. Not for lack of desire to recommend this or that indispensable book of Renaissance poetry, to tout the merits of a style, the charm of a storyline, or the color palette of an illustration, because of course he had an opinion about everything. But he was tactful enough to leave that task to Léon, who enjoyed it so much. After all, he was only a cat.

That morning, however, when Monsieur Battisti — the warden from the Jardin des Plantes himself! — entered the bookshop with a purposeful step, Archibald was terribly tempted to reverse his decision and go at once to speak to this distinguished guest who was honoring them with a visit. The man, who had severe features, a salt-and-pepper mustache, and the regulation midnight

blue uniform, was heading solemnly toward the Tales and Legends shelf, and Archibald — who had no shortage of imagination — could already picture himself charming this intransigent king, like a feline Scheherazade, by reciting his favorite passages from *The Arabian Nights*.

He was getting ready to speak when his attention was suddenly diverted by an affair of the utmost importance. Something had just caught his eye. Something unique, hanging from one of the branches of the Christmas tree, something at once familiar and strange, that all at once stirred his catlike desire more powerfully than any thousand-year-old tale could. This something was none other than the little pine cone that Léon had unthinkingly placed on a branch a moment earlier.

Archibald's almond-shaped eyes began to shine piercingly bright. Forgetting the uniformed warden, Scheherazade, and everything else, he leapt onto the Mystery shelf, raced at full tilt toward the Art Books, grazed the vellum of a rare edition, and swooped down on the tree, claws out to seize his prey. Victory! And crash! The pine cone came unstuck from the branch and fell in a perfect circu-

lar arc right into the candle on the counter, spattering scented wax all around it. When it plunged into the candle, the pine cone had abruptly snuffed out its flame and gotten covered in a fine layer of wax.

Monsieur Battisti jumped. Léon, who was accustomed to the escapades of his faithful assistant, just relit the candle and hung the pine cone back on the tree as simply as he had the first time. This done, he headed toward the severe warden to welcome him as best he could.

“Please excuse my cat, dear sir, he’s a bit crazed today... how can I help you? Are you looking for something in particular?” he asked with a smile.

Monsieur Battisti, very dignified in his dark suit, answered Léon in a serious voice.

“I doubt you can help me, my young friend. I am looking for a very specific book... a book about which I know nothing, not even whether it exists.”

His salt-and-pepper mustache seemed to stretch downward, making him look even more distressed.

“In truth,” he continued, “I wonder what I am even doing here. Perhaps I should go, I am wasting my time.”



And with these words, the man took a step toward the exit, stiffer than ever. But Léon stopped him short.

“Wait!” he exclaimed. “At least tell me what you’re looking for... you never know...”

The warden hesitated for a moment. He laid his gray eyes on Léon, then spoke again. “Right you are, one never knows. Well then: I would like a book of stories.”

“A book of stories?” answered Léon. “Nothing could be easier! We have a whole section of them!”

“Yes, but what I seek is a book of stories addressed to all, including to grown-ups.”

“Hmmm... we should be able to find something like that,” Léon answered gently.

“Wait, I was not finished!” the warden continued, growing more and more animated. “The story must involve nature...”

“Yes...”

“But it must take place in a city...”

“Ah...”

“And not just any city! In our neighborhood! In the 5th arrondissement of Paris, to be exact!” the warden insisted.

“I...” mumbled the bookseller, somewhat disconcerted.

“And I want the book to be realistic, but to leave space for magic, a book that is intriguing but not frightening, a book that is joyous and profound, a big illustrated book that is...” — Leon held his breath at such precise determination — “small enough to fit in my hand!”

For a few moments, Léon seemed lost in a maze of uneasy thoughts. How was he to solve this literary equation? Did this impossible book exist? If there was one thing he hated, it was disappointing a reader. What could be worse in life than not being able to find the book one yearns to read? Not to mention that the warden of the Jardin des Plantes was a local fixture, full of authority and gravitas, even a bit intimidating. Léon concentrated with all his might, mobilizing his large memory, mentally reviewing all the shelves in his bookshop, and... Hurrah! All at once he leaped onto the ladder, climbed up to the top four steps by four, moved several piles of books aside, contorted himself, plunged his arm into a dark corner, and fished about for a moment. Finally, victoriously, he waved a little book, so small it could fit entirely in the palm of a hand — just like a pine cone picked up on the

forest trails of childhood... or found on one's doorstep of a winter morning.

Léon came down from the ladder and placed the little book in the warden's hand, at once relieved, proud, and delighted to have solved this thorny riddle. The guard reached into his pocket and produced a pair of glasses rimmed in gray metal, carefully opened the little book, and began to read without a word, brow furrowed deeper than ever. The bookseller feverishly watched his face for a sign of approval or refusal. And then, right before his eyes, a little miracle occurred. Page after page, imperceptibly at first and then more and more markedly, the stern warden's facial expression softened as he continued reading. At the end of the first chapter, he even — no doubt for the first time in many years — showed a hint of a smile, distinct enough that his salt-and-pepper mustache didn't fully conceal it. Léon, who had been watching with bated breath, thought he saw in the folds of his dimples something like the look of a child who, in spite of a recent tantrum, can no longer hide the evident joy winning him over. "Good, good," said the warden, closing the little book as though trying to return to his senses, "this

will do. I shall take it. “He added nothing, made no commentary, but at the moment he left, once the little book was wrapped up and carefully placed in the front pocket of his uniform, one of his heavy shoes already on the asphalt of the sidewalk, he turned to Léon and let out a sonorous and unexpected “Thanks! See you next time!” in an astonishingly young voice. A broad smile now lit up his face, his eyes shone joyously bright, and his whole face was different in a very agreeable way.

Perplexed, Léon watched him recede into the distance, almost skipping. Archibald, for his part, was unsurprised by this sudden change. He knew the magical power of literature, and was hardly one to be moved by so little. For now, perfectly motionless at the foot of the Christmas tree, eyes narrowed in concentration, he couldn’t shake his fascination with this pine cone. The wax that now covered it made strange, novel figures on its scales. Archibald was trying to figure out just what they reminded him of: the outline of a supernatural tree? The facial features of an angel? The letters of a secret message? Several times he circled the tree, observing the pine cone from

every angle. Then he jumped onto the counter for an aerial view. At last, weary, having found no satisfactory answer to his interrogations, he returned on velvet feet to his poetic radiator, tail waving like a pendulum. “The shape of a pine cone changes faster, alas, than the heart of a mortal,” he thought, “as good old Charles said” — Baudelaire, of course. Then he dozed off, stretched out across the complete works of Victor Hugo.

Things sometimes change so imperceptibly that you would need to be able to place our life under an enormous magnifying glass, or to be a poet, to precisely grasp its new nuances. So take up your microscope, you who look at the world, and sharpen your poetical sensibility, for reality is about to change in front of us. Under our noses, so to speak.

The next morning, Léon crossed the Jardin des Plantes as he had the day before. As he had the day before, he felt the city bristling with anticipation. He opened his bookshop, made a coffee, greeted Archibald, and, as he had the day before, lit the scented candle on the oak counter. But something — he hadn't stopped thinking about it since he turned the brass knob of the glass door and entered his cavern of books — was no longer quite as it had been

the day before.

Archibald came to greet him and perform his ceremonial choreography: arching his back against Léon's calves, slinking serpentinely between his legs, and gently meowing his salutations. The cat then began his customary literary promenade. This time he jumped onto the Philosophy shelf and laid his well-read paws on the books of Montaigne, recalling as he did those phrases from the *Essays* that had become one of his personal precepts as a bookshop cat: "When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep." Next he skipped quickly over Leibniz — the *New Essays on Human Understanding* had never really excited his unreasonable mind. His tail slid over Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, of which his recollection was, all told, rather hazy. Finally Archibald sat down, having arrived at J as in Jankélévitch, on a book whose title had never ceased to delight his feline-poet soul: *The Certain-Something and the Almost-Nothing*.

Léon, meanwhile, was trying to name that *certain-something* that had, since that morning, been giving him the feeling that *almost-nothing* was as it had been. Was it the

holidays continuing their inevitable approach, spreading their aura of joy through the air? Was it the harsher light of an early winter morning? Was it Archibald, who seemed even more restless than usual? Or perhaps, somewhere in this labyrinth of books, one was missing from one of the rickety pyramids, creating an imbalance that threatened to make everything collapse?

As he considered this question, Léon went about his work. He grabbed a tall pile of dictionaries and hoisted them onto the counter, inhaling deeply to catch his breath. And this was when the *certain-something* revealed itself. At first it was a vague impression, but as he breathed it became sharper: a mysterious scent of resin, wood, and pine needles was floating on the bookshop air.

It didn't take long to trace this sweet fragrance to its source, as Archibald was already circling it like the satellite of some fascinating planet. The scent was coming from the little pine cone that had been hung the day before on a branch of the Christmas tree. Léon crouched down and, copying his cat, leaned in too. The attractive force of this new celestial body was not weakening. Léon



moved closer, bit by bit, as though following a secret trail.

At that very moment the bell on the door jangled joyously. Léon and Archibald looked up. They barely had time to make out a reedy silhouette before it disappeared into the shelves. Tearing himself away from the fascinating spectacle of the scented pine cone, Léon got up to greet this mysterious customer — but Archibald got there first. Trotting with a lithe, dancing gait, with a grace that might be characterized as feline, he was the first to sniff out the new arrival, hiding in a nook behind the Foreign Literature section. It was a timid, gentle teenager whose youthful face was half concealed by a broad curtain of bangs. Archibald, whose erudition made him an expert in several areas (if not all of them), was particularly savvy about human nature. He knew it was necessary to show great tact with timid adolescents so as not scare them off. So he gave up on the idea (tempting though it was) of immediately reciting one of his favorite poems in a learned tone, and opted for a subtle and silent approach, passing by the boy and passing him again, brushing his legs with the tip of his tail.

“Hello!” said Léon, who had just joined them. “Can I help you?”

The teenager’s only response was a terrified look. What an oaf Léon is! Archibald thought. No sense of psychology! It was imperative that they change course, lest the poor boy take flight. Desperate times call for desperate measures! Archibald thought. In a single leap, he jumped onto a shelf and began capering adorably, like a perfectly normal pet.

The teenager gave a hint of a smile and reached out a hand to stroke him. Archibald then jumped into his arms and, for his grand finale, began purring at full steam. Now the teenager was actually laughing.

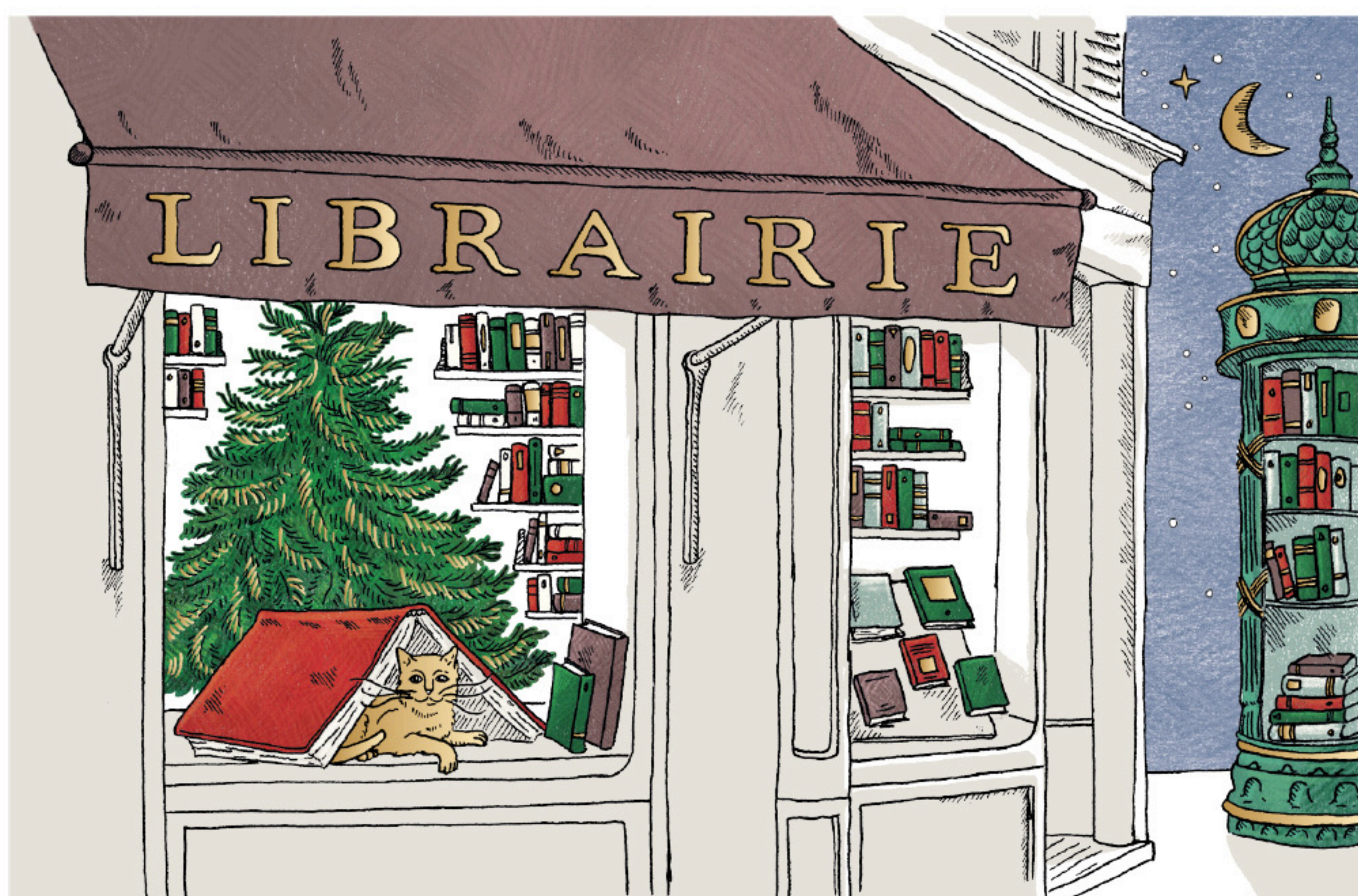
“May I introduce Archibald,” said Léon. “And my name is Léon. If you need any help, don’t hesitate to ask us... but you can also take your time looking at the books.”

The boy puffed out his bangs before answering in a single stream, very fast, with a voice alternating treble and bass: “I’m Gaspard, and I’m not really that into books, so usually I don’t dare go into bookshops, but I was walking by on the street and I saw the tree and I smelled this perfume that smelled so good and then I don’t know why but I had

this irresistible urge to come in and see and so... there you go.” He stopped to catch his breath. “Is it okay if I stay a little bit?” he added.

Léon, smiling, answered that he could stay as long as he liked. Archibald, for his part, was already making a little mental list of novels that would — he was absolutely certain — restore this lovable hominid’s taste for reading once and for all.

But all at once a sudden attraction called to him urgently, awakening the irrepressible need to hurry over for a closer look. Indeed, in those few minutes of conversation, the pine cone had started spinning, revealing a unique and fascinating brightness. In one immense and graceful leap up to the Cinema shelf, and a spin via History, Archibald pounced on the object of his fascination. Was it a sun? A gold nugget? A treasure? With an enthusiastic swipe of his paw, he set it spinning faster. Like a disco ball with a thousand facets, it began projecting golden rays all around. These diffracted brightly all the way to the Science Fiction books, ricocheted off the Travel books, and concluded their enchanted course on



the hooded sweatshirt of Gaspard, who was leaving the shop with a spring in his step, promising to come back soon.

Léon and Archibald were still and silent for a moment, contemplating the golden glints dancing before their eyes. Both were captivated by the shimmering spectacle the pine cone offered up as it continued its orbital movement in the half-light. If the phrase hadn't been exhausted by centuries of good poems and then less good poems, and if Archibald, like any uncompromising literary critic, didn't have a healthy aversion to clichéd expressions, we might have written that both Léon and Archibald had *stars in their eyes*. Because it must be acknowledged: that was, literally speaking, the exact and luminous truth.

There was no longer any doubt: something in the bookshop had changed. The following days only confirmed it. Each day the scent wafting from the pine cone grew a little bit stronger, suffusing the place with a mellow aroma. As its scales opened, its golden glow shone a little



bit brighter each day. Each day Gaspard returned, a little bolder each time, asking questions about this or that book before sitting beneath the tree, cross-legged, to devour a story in the pine cone's golden light.

And indeed he wasn't the only one to come often. For soon the scent enveloped the entire neighborhood, all the way to the Pont d'Austerlitz and even the quays of the Seine. This perfume intrigued a growing number of passersby. They pushed open the bookshop's door with curiosity, attracted by the fragrance of the tree, and stayed, instantly ensorcelled, to admire the shifting sparkles projected by the pine cone: it was as though the air were iridescent with a golden powder. The books' cream-white covers, the readers' multicolored jackets, Archibald's feline fur, Léon's chestnut hair — everything was aglow with a many-hued splendor. Archibald, who never tired of pretty things, often rushed to the pine cone and, with an awe-stricken swipe of the paw, relaunched it on its circular trajectory. Regularly, a visitor would approach Léon to inquire about the source of this almost magical scent and about this fairylike light brightening the shop. Léon only said, with a smile: "You'll have to ask my cat; he

knows many more things than I do.”

But Archibald — although he concurred with this claim entirely — didn’t say a word, preferring to keep the mystery intact. One evening, a woman woke him up for an explanation. Archibald almost answered her, but chose not to. “Isn’t it strange!” the disappointed woman said as she left. Archibald mused, philosophically, that “the beautiful is always bizarre, as good old Charles said” — Baudelaire, of course. Then he resumed his nap, stretched out across the complete works of Emily Dickinson.

The body sometimes gets so chilled that you would need, in order to ward off numbness, to warm it all over near an open flame or strike up a song hot as a campfire. So take a bit of fire, you who traverse the winter, and sing the most burning melody, for the snow has begun to fall. Under our feet, so to speak.

As Léon walked through the Jardin des Plantes, his fawn leather shoes sank into the snow with such a soft crunch that he slowed down even further, lifting and placing his feet with infinite caution, like an astronaut newly arrived on the moon or a ballet dancer dissecting the steps of a new choreography. He raised his head, savored each flake that dotted his face, and continued on his way across the city. Since the night before, the snow had been falling without interruption. It had blurred the edges of the Jardin des Plantes's rectilinear paths, softened the light

stone of the quays of the Seine, whitened the asphalt of the sidewalks and the gray of the rooftops, the metallic blue of the cars, the green and yellow of the trash and recycling bins — and even the neon of the joggers. All these colors were now no more than moving memories that reappeared here and there in traces, thanks to the snowballs that children fashioned from some of this fine white coating.

A magical new Paris, made up of gently swollen shapes, of faces drawn on car windshields, of clouds hanging from trees, spread out before Léon. He pricked up his ears and opened his dazzled eyes wide. He would have liked to record this new silence reigning over the streets, to photograph the faces of passersby. All of them, from the youngest to the oldest, wore the luminous smile of those who have just lapsed into a second childhood or rediscovered a joyous insouciance buried in them for too long. All of them seemed to move through the city and through this day as though magnetically drawn to the coming evening's feast. For in no more than a few hours, it would be the most magical night of the year.

Arriving at the bookshop, Léon scraped his shoes on the snowy doormat. Through the glass door he could already see the sparkling rays of the pine cone, which was shining brighter than ever. Léon entered and stood still for a moment, eyes closed, charmed by the delicate odor of the tree, even stronger and subtler than the day before. He was surprised when Archibald, especially happy to see him, jumped into his arms. He was a very reserved cat, and it had been a few years since such a demonstration of affection: he too, it seemed, had lapsed into a second childhood. When Léon seized the opportunity to stroke his belly, however, the noble Archie wriggled nimbly out of his arms — let's not get carried away.

Léon lit the scented candle on the counter and, as he watched Archibald trot around, suddenly had the impression that another flame was flying through the bookshop. Like the pine cone, Archibald's fur had also taken on an astonishing golden gleam, which was sparkling in the direction of the shelf of books supposedly reserved for "young readers." For his part, Archibald was firmly convinced of the absurdity of such distinctions among liter-



ary genres. Though he was a decidedly adult feline, not a day went by that he didn't think of Peter Pan, in which he had found a method for flight, or of Treasure Island, which had given him his lifelong taste for piracy and raw fish. To say nothing, of course, of the adventures of the Three Musketeers, which still inspired his every valorous cavalcade in pursuit of mouse, pine cone, or other members of the Cardinal's Guard. In his final skid, in fact, Archibald knocked over Alexandre Dumas's novel, in a sort of involuntary homage.

"All for one, one for all!": the day passed as quickly as a snowball fight, and with a roughly comparable feel of hustle and bustle. Strollers hurried into the bookshop. They would breathe in the atmosphere with a delighted look and open their eyes wide with curiosity, their coats still covered in snow, always fascinated by the enchanting scent and the spectacle of gold glints. Then they would choose a book to give as a gift or to keep for themselves, and Léon would wrap it in tissue paper with the expert dexterity of a first-rate swordsman. Archibald, prouder than d'Artagnan, continued his relentless circuit around

the tree and through the shelves, trying to catch hold of the diamonds from the Queen's necklace projected all around him.

Outside, the snow was still whirling, and through the shop window people could be seen hurrying to their festive dinners, arms full of drinks and gifts. The day raced by this way and the customers left the bookshop one by one, with smiling lips and festive souls and one last look behind them. Finally, when the last book was wrapped in tissue paper, the bell on the front door jangled a last goodbye, and Léon and Archibald were alone. In the now quiet bookshop, the gold-scaled pine cone spun softly in the middle of the tree, like a holiday spectacle for them alone. Its rays shone even brighter in the half-shadow of the falling dusk. They watched it for a moment in silence, each lost in his thoughts.

And then a fluorescent flash burst forth and raced into the shop. A woman in jogging clothes had just made a supercharged entrance into the bookshop. It was one of the joggers Léon regularly saw running along the paths of the

Jardin des Plantes. "Are you still open?" The air had suddenly and quite logically gone electric. Without waiting for an answer, the jogger began trotting up and down the aisles of the bookshop. "I've actually never been in here, but I was attracted by the scent, it's incredible," she continued, paying no attention to the reactions of Léon and Archibald, who were trying to track her orange and black outfit between the piles of books. Archibald had jumped down from his perch to go meet her: it was rare for a fidgetier person than him to fidget so much in his favorite fidgeting spot. She began to spin in place as she watched the bronze glints of the pine cone. "I don't usually read, I can never find time, but this smell... and this light... it's crazy!" she said. Léon, who had become slightly dizzy since she entered the shop, invited her to sit and have something to drink. A decaf, perhaps? A verbena tea? The jogger was breathing intensely. Sitting down for a quiet cup of tea was hardly this hurried woman's style. Plus the festivities awaited, she had to finish her run, get groceries, stop at home, call her mother, get changed, and then... And then, strangely, she stopped trotting. Moving at a walking pace now, she continued to breathe in the air,

catching her breath more intensely each time. And — unexpected miracle! — she sat down. This abruptly relaxed rhythm seemed to surprise even her, as though she were discovering a cadence she had never really known.

“Oh my goodness, there are so many books here...” she said, looking up at the immense shelves. Archibald leapt and landed at her feet.

“Excuse him,” said Léon, “my cat loves giving readers extremely personalized tours of the bookshop. His name is Archibald, and I’m Léon,” he added, placing a mug of piping hot tea in front of her.

“Iris,” she answered. “Enchantée.”

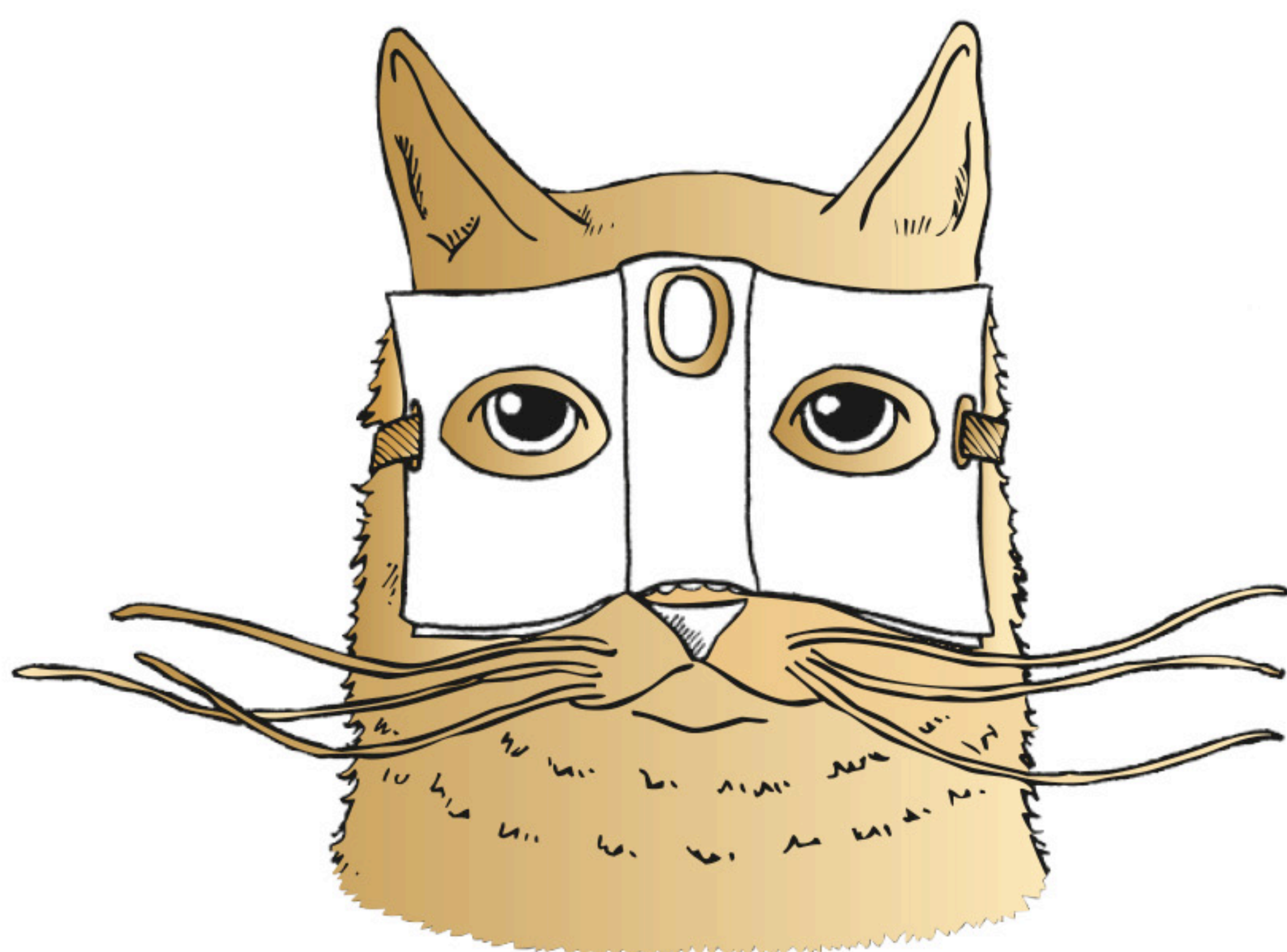
Indeed, since she had come in, Archibald had been thinking of books he could recommend to her once she finally stopped hopping around. She reminded him of the rabbit from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, but would she recognize herself if she read it? Archibald, who knew the art of laziness down to its most intricate variations, now faced quite the complex case. What book do you offer someone who runs faster than eyes travel across a page? How do you dive into a story and cut yourself off

from the world when you're chasing after it? Deep in these sinuous considerations, Archibald placed a paw on *Novels in Three Lines* by Félix Fénéon, the densest and most potent stories he knew. Then he slid his long tail over a large collection of Japanese haiku that he often savored on his poetic radiator to recall the delicate taste of contemplation. Léon grabbed a few poetry books as well and placed them casually in front of Iris.

"We're closing soon, but take your time. For books, we have a whole lifetime..."

Iris the jogger had stopped running. She was taking little sips of the tea Léon had served her and opened one of the books in front of her without thinking. Still without thinking, she began to read, letting the poems take root in her mind page by page, their images, their stories, their rhythm. Because she wasn't thinking about it, time, logically enough, had all but disappeared.

So, a century later — or a few minutes — this interlude came to an abrupt stop. The bell on the door had just rung and Gaspard's face had appeared, followed almost immediately by that of Monsieur Battisti, who, he said



with a smile, wanted urgently to discuss the story Léon had recommended to him a few days ago. Gaspard, for his part, was apparently looking for a secret book that he wanted to give to a secret person.

“Maybe you know Iris,” whispered Léon, “she often runs in the Jardin des Plantes...”

The quiet library now began to rustle with conversations that flowed among these readers who had been attracted to this place almost magically. They who had only distantly crossed paths began chatting as though they’d known each other for years. Paris had become a village, and the bookshop was its warm epicenter. The extraordinary light and scent lent this moment the allure of an unexpected feast. Evidently Archibald wanted to take part in the joy reigning over the bookshop (and maybe also show off a bit). Shot through by a lightning bolt of energy, he jumped from his perch to the Geography shelf, slid over the floor, and then leapt onto the tree, aiming for the pine cone as one might gleefully strike a gong.

But his joy — and consequently the paw-swipe — were so powerful that the pine cone came off the tree. It ricocheted onto the counter, on which it left a few golden

traces, then rolled along the floor so far that it ended up on the sidewalk, in the middle of the doormat. Léon, Monsieur Battisti, Gaspard, and Iris had stopped their conversations for a moment to watch it go, turning their heads left or right as though trying to track a tennis ball in a furious volley. Game, set, match: the pine cone had landed on the exact spot where Léon had found it one week earlier.

And like that early morning, the pine cone seemed to be waiting for them. So it was quite naturally that Léon walked up to it. A great silence had fallen over the joyous assembly. The night had spread its shadows. For some unknown reason, all the streetlamps were out. And the pine cone shone bright through the dark city.

Léon approached, bent down, picked up the pine cone, and put it in the pocket of his long coat. Then he looked up. If Iris, Archibald, Monsieur Battisti, and Gaspard hadn't joined him, and if they hadn't seemed just as incredulous as he, Léon might have thought himself in a dream. "But is it possible for several people to have the

same dream at the same time?" he wondered. "Isn't that precisely what philosophers call reality?" Archibald might have answered — but no words were exchanged, and it wasn't the moment for such lofty philosophical considerations. All of them were dumbfounded by what they saw: along the snowy sidewalks, the city's trees had turned into enormous evergreens.

These trees seemed to issue from some faraway Nordic forest that had abruptly sprung up between the Parisian cars and streetlamps, growing until they reached the tops of the tall dressed-stone buildings. Captivated, Léon and his friends began to walk down the middle of the street, alone in this strange world, this forest-city with an intense aroma of evergreen wafting over it. Their steps sank softly into the fresh snow. They looked at the starry sky and then the city plunged into darkness. Turning around, they suddenly saw, at the next corner, Archibald's silhouette shining on the snow. His fur had taken on a golden splendor, and he was walking through the city like a moving lighthouse adrift in the ocean, illuminating everything around. All four quickened the pace of their



same dream at the same time?" he wondered. "Isn't that precisely what philosophers call reality?" Archibald might have answered — but no words were exchanged, and it wasn't the moment for such lofty philosophical considerations. All of them were dumbfounded by what they saw: along the snowy sidewalks, the city's trees had turned into enormous evergreens.

These trees seemed to issue from some faraway Nordic forest that had abruptly sprung up between the Parisian cars and streetlamps, growing until they reached the tops of the tall dressed-stone buildings. Captivated, Léon and his friends began to walk down the middle of the street, alone in this strange world, this forest-city with an intense aroma of evergreen wafting over it. Their steps sank softly into the fresh snow. They looked at the starry sky and then the city plunged into darkness. Turning around, they suddenly saw, at the next corner, Archibald's silhouette shining on the snow. His fur had taken on a golden splendor, and he was walking through the city like a moving lighthouse adrift in the ocean, illuminating everything around. All four quickened the pace of their

nocturnal navigation to follow in the luminous wake of this decidedly very singular cat.

Around them, everything was the same and yet different, familiar and novel. They could barely recognize the streets of their neighborhood. As one trusts the reassuring beam of a flashlight, they trailed Archibald's golden glow as he guided them beneath the trees. Sometimes speaking, more often silent, all five formed a strange and joyous procession, happy to feel the winter night's cool kiss on their cheeks. They walked along the gates of the Jardin des Plantes all the way to the Seine, then followed the Quai Saint-Bernard to the Pont de Sully. From there, the tip of the Île Saint-Louis looked like the prow of an enormous icebound ship. In the distance, on their right, the gilded Génie de la Bastille on its July Column brandished its flame amid the snowflakes. On their left, the snow-covered towers of Notre-Dame de Paris rose above the forest like two rocky peaks. They walked back up the Boulevard Saint-Germain to the Place Maubert, which, circled by colossal evergreens, had transformed into a sort of clearing at the heart of the city. They then followed the Rue des Écoles until they arrived at the high



nocturnal navigation to follow in the luminous wake of this decidedly very singular cat.

Around them, everything was the same and yet different, familiar and novel. They could barely recognize the streets of their neighborhood. As one trusts the reassuring beam of a flashlight, they trailed Archibald's golden glow as he guided them beneath the trees. Sometimes speaking, more often silent, all five formed a strange and joyous procession, happy to feel the winter night's cool kiss on their cheeks. They walked along the gates of the Jardin des Plantes all the way to the Seine, then followed the Quai Saint-Bernard to the Pont de Sully. From there, the tip of the Île Saint-Louis looked like the prow of an enormous icebound ship. In the distance, on their right, the gilded Génie de la Bastille on its July Column brandished its flame amid the snowflakes. On their left, the snow-covered towers of Notre-Dame de Paris rose above the forest like two rocky peaks. They walked back up the Boulevard Saint-Germain to the Place Maubert, which, circled by colossal evergreens, had transformed into a sort of clearing at the heart of the city. They then followed the Rue des Écoles until they arrived at the high



windows of the Université de la Sorbonne. Then, as though climbing the path of an alpine massif, Archibald turned into the little streets of the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève leading to the Panthéon. Upon arriving at the square, they made a circle around the antique temple and cast their wondering eyes toward the Jardin du Luxembourg: under the ink-black sky strewn with sparkling stars, the Parisian park had become something like the Black Forest.

Later, when this suspended moment had become a memory, none of them could say how long this stroll had lasted. The hours had gone by simply, the way happy moments pass without our noticing. What they knew for sure of was that at some point a chill fatigue overtook them, and thoughts of the holiday meal returned to their minds. Archibald's luminescent steps had led them to the building where Léon lived. Léon pointed to the window of his apartment, near the snow-covered rooftops. "What would you say to celebrating?" he said — and it was clear from his lively tone that it wasn't really a question. Upstairs, a welcoming warmth awaited them. There were

books in every corner, fresh bread, and joy for all. Archibald, who had just jumped into Iris's arms, inwardly recited his favorite lullaby from good old Guillaume — Apollinaire, of course: "Uncertainty, oh my delight. / You and I, we go onward / Just like the crawfish / Backwards, always backwards."

Life sometimes takes such surprising routes that you would need, in order to keep from getting lost, to know how to draw complicated maps, or scatter little pebbles throughout the narrative like the most skillful storytellers. So take out your colored pencils, you who move through life, open a great atlas, and think back on the most astonishing tales, for we are almost at the end of the road. At its final crossing, so to speak.

Léon walked out holding Archibald, who seemed to appreciate being thusly carried that morning. “I do like to be happy,” he thought — and this quotation, for once, was not borrowed from Guillaume (Apollinaire) or from Charles (Baudelaire), but was a creation by Archie (Bald), who was decidedly talented in every way. In the light of day, last night had left them with unreal images, like

those from a happy dream one wishes one could hold on to: an evergreen-scented dream.

Outside, the snow had stopped whirling over the great city, and passersby passed by on the still-white sidewalks. Life seemed to have returned to normal.

If one had traced their path on a map, one would have found it difficult to understand its meaning or logic. They crossed the square to the Rue Valette, they turned right, then left, then right again and left and so on until they reached the Seine. “Back to the bookshop for a hot coffee!” said Léon — Archibald said nothing, for he was asleep again.

There was no denying it: what Léon was wordlessly seeking was no longer there. Last night’s forest of evergreen trees, though it had spread its canopy into each corner of his memory and the city’s streets, over each square, park, and garden, had disappeared. In the place of the majestic conifers magnified last night by the bright light of the stars stood plane, linden, and chestnut trees, meek and banal, stretching their bare branches toward the gray sky. But evergreens? Not a trace. The very vestiges of their presence had evaporated. Though Archibald’s fur still had

a few golden glints to it, it no longer shone with last night's flamelike glow. Though Léon kept searching the sidewalks, which were still partly covered by a fine coat of snow, he could make out neither pine cone nor pine needle. It was as though Paris had transformed, no less, back into Paris. The forest-city had become a city again. Had they had a collective hallucination last night? A slightly closer look at the passersby was enough to affirm that they weren't the only ones who were stunned. Several of the people they passed had a little crease just above the eyebrows, which perplexity caused to meander sometimes all the way up the forehead. Only the scent of resin remained, perfuming the streets, making the incredulous pedestrians raise their faces and noses. Was this perfume not proof that this strange dream had been real? "I often have this strange and striking dream..." Léon murmured, almost involuntarily, remembering the first poem he ever learned by heart. "Of an unfamiliar city that I love and that loves me..." Archibald continued in his head, slightly altering the line by good old Paul (Verlaine), which he evidently knew like the back of his paw.

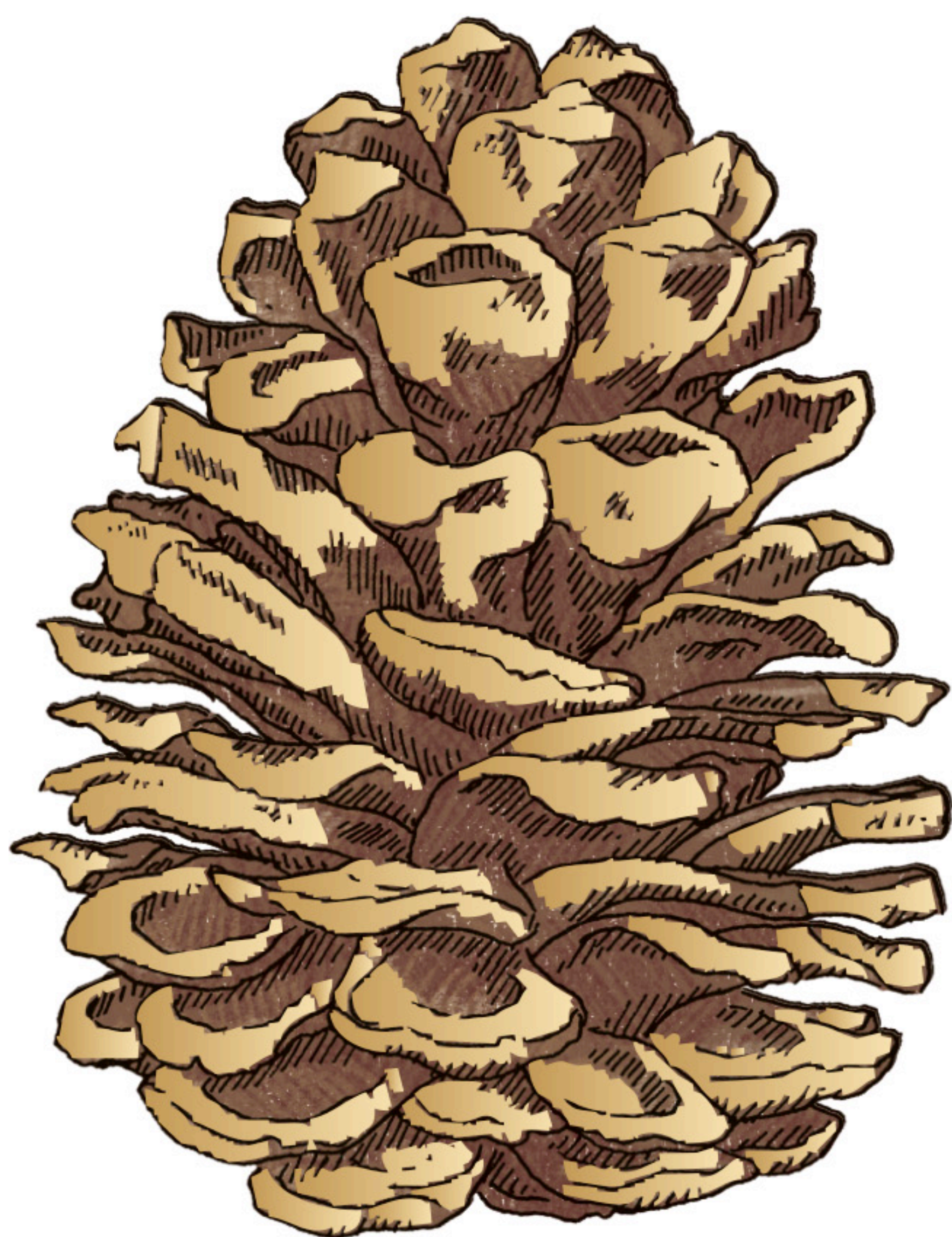
Approaching the bookshop, Léon reflexively turned the little pine cone between his fingers. This pine cone, so singular, with scales of gold and a sweet scent, buried deep in his pocket like a protective amulet. He had the feeling that from now on anything could happen, and that nothing would surprise him. Would a fairytale dragon rise up around the next corner? Would the Museum's dinosaurs come to life and start singing? Had the apartment building transformed overnight into Hansel and Gretel's gingerbread house? What adventure would they find around the bend in the path? What marvel awaited them today on the bookshop's doormat?

Though the doormat was empty, a surprise nonetheless awaited Léon and Archibald that morning. Iris, Gaspard, and Monsieur Battisti were waiting in front of the shop window, broad smiles on their lips — after last night's celebration, they had secretly agreed to meet and surprise Léon the morning after. Archibald let out an affectionate meow. Léon turned the key in the lock and stepped in cautiously, followed by the band of readerly friends. The bookshop was still sleeping its sleep of closed books, silent and solemn like all very lively places once their

doors close to the public. It was exactly as they had left it last night, with its scented candle on the waxed oak counter, its perfectly arranged honey-colored shelves, and its unsteadily balanced piles of books. Archibald, happy to see his favorite playing and reading ground, leapt out of Léon's arms and raced off to his radiator.

While Iris, Gaspard, and Monsieur Battisti browsed the bookshop's shelves, touching their fingertips to each title as though greedily choosing a chocolate from a very large box, Léon took the little pine cone from his pocket and placed it delicately on the counter. It no longer shone like the night before, but the matte wood of its scales was superbly gilded. Then he headed for the coffee maker, whistling a tune located approximately at the intersection of Vivaldi and the Beatles.

His symphonic whistling stopped abruptly when he fell flat on the floor — without injury, happily, thanks to regularly watching Archie break his falls over the years. The latter, proud and calm on his poetic perch, meowed to show his tender feline solidarity for this human who was distinctly less supple and graceful than he.



Léon had just tripped on something uneven on the parquet floor. And yet he knew every square centimeter of his bookshop by heart, and could have made his way through it on a dark foggy night with his eyes closed and not displaced a single pile. He was certain, then: this hump hadn't been there the night before. He crouched down and passed his palm over the swelling in the floor that had caused his tumble. The shape, oval and smooth like a wooden snake, originated a few meters from the Christmas tree and grew thicker as it approached the trunk.

Perplexed, Léon stood up. This time he examined the tree from top to bottom and at last he understood: the tree had spread its roots into the bookshop. They were spreading around him like the filaments of a shooting star. They had taken shape in the parquet, inscribing themselves there and merging with it. It was as though the tree had been planted years ago and rooted itself deeply over time. It was organically part of the place, the central tree and intuitive hub in the vast forest of books rising all around it.



That very morning, Léon had thought nothing more could surprise him. He had been wrong. This new wonder left him speechless and frozen for a moment, eyes open wide. “How about that coffee?” asked Monsieur Battisti, undaunted, setting down on the counter a first selection of books chosen from the bookshop’s shelves. As he did this, he brushed against a branch of the tree, and a drop of wax fell onto the cover of the book on top of the pile. The warden leaned down and lifted the book to his face. The wax gave off a scent recognizable to all: it was the perfume from last night’s waking dream, the evergreen perfume of a winter night, of an ephemeral forest in the heart of the city.

Archibald, who never missed anything, sensed that something important was at stake. Not about to be outdone, he had left his perch and leapt onto the counter without warning. He nearly knocked over the pile of books, stumbled, righted himself with dignity, and finished by jumping onto the tree, causing a myriad of little drops of gilded and scented wax to rain down, dotting the tree’s own branches. It was, once more, a magical moment. Archibald was very pleased with himself. He came down

from the counter modestly and strode away without looking back, like a movie star walking calmly offscreen as the camera looks on.

Seeing this little drop of wax gleaming on the book's cover, Léon suddenly had an idea. Without a word, as the others looked on curiously, he set off through the shelves of his bookstore, spurred by a new energy. He climbed up the ladder, ran this way and that, and soon returned with a pile of books in hand. These were the books that were dearest to him, the ones that had nourished his imagination as a man and peopled his nights as a child, that had taught him words and emotion, the ones that helped him live and think and that had given him once and for all a passion for books, all books, books of love and books of science, books of adventure and books of excitement, boring books and entertaining books, his friends forever, friends you hold closest to your heart and for which your love is never exhausted, even when you share it with thousands of others.

Now, in a kind of improvised ceremony, as serious and solemn as the ceremonies of childhood, Léon placed a

little drop of wax on each of them: a drop of wax on *An Ordinary Life* by Georges Perros; another on *Daimler s'en va* by Frédéric Berthet; a third on *Ada or Ardor* by Nabokov. It was a way of forever sealing, in a sweet scent of evergreen, that magic pact that ties humans to literature. Archibald, always meddling, was a bit vexed. In his view, felines were no less tied to literature than humans. He insisted on placing the same magic seal on his dear *Fleurs du Mal* by Charles (Baudelaire) and on *Alcools* by good old Guillaume (Apollinaire). Monsieur Battisti produced from his pocket the little illustrated book of Paris stories that Léon had recommended to him eight days ago now, which he brought everywhere with him. Iris, no longer afraid to run after sentences longer than the paths of the Jardin des Plantes, chose *Time Regained* by Marcel Proust. Gaspard, for his part, elected J. D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, whose first pages he had read sitting cross-legged in a corner of the bookshop a few days earlier — and which he could already tell might change his life.

Since that day, whenever Léon (with help, when they come to visit, from his friends in the neighborhood)

wraps a book in tissue paper to entrust it to a new reader, he never forgets to stamp it with a seal of this magnificent wax, in the memory of a little pine cone, of a winter night under the evergreens, of a unique evening, of a magical pact, and of a bookstore-forest.

If one day you happen into this shop, you who are discovering this story, you may feel with your fingertip that soft stamp of scented wax on the cover of the book you take away. If you ask the bookseller Léon the reason for this singular habit, know that his only answer will surely be that you should ask his cat Archibald, who is much more savant than he is, as you can imagine. If Archibald isn't fast asleep on his poetic radiator, if you dare to wake up this sage with long white whiskers to question him, if he deigns to answer you, and if you know how to open your ears to hear him, you will receive his incontestable explanation: "Oh, it's quite simple: just like books, this wax is the stuff dreams are made on." Then, eyes rounded with sleep, he'll doze off again, sprawled out across the complete works of good old William — Shakespeare, of course.

