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The Body in the Sleigh
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The Body in the Sleigh is dedicated to librarians and I want to write about them and libraries, but first a bit about how this book came to be written. In 2003 I wrote a short story, "The Two Marys," which was published in the 2004 Avon collection, *Mistletoe and Mayhem*. Over the years I've heard authors talk about falling in love with their characters and said characters taking over. I had never had those experiences, although I'm extremely fond of Faith Fairchild and it would be wonderful if she could take over, saving me from the task of writing about her'some sort of automatic writing, perhaps? I'd have more time to read, for one thing. And then I did fall in love with Mary Bethany and Miriam Carpenter. And, in a way, they took over.

By definition, a short story is short, but as I wrote it I kept wanting to write more about these two women, much more. I wanted to write about their childhoods and I wanted to write about the two of them together. I wanted to write Faith into more scenes. I was happy with the way the story came out and was honored when Malice Domestic nominated it for an Agatha Award, but I kept wishing I had been able to write a novel instead. When I mentioned it to my agent, Faith Hamlin (serendipitous note: I wrote the first book prior to meeting this Faith!) she said, "Why not?" Why not indeed and I was off, free to write about these two women, and all sorts of new characters, to my heart's content. What resulted was not simply an expansion of the short story, as I planned originally, but a completely new tale and one that has become very dear to me. This is because of the message of the season and the people whose paths crossed at that time of the year. I admit to getting choked up when I wrote about Jake and Norah and read the last lines in the Epilogue.

And now to libraries.

Henry Ward Beecher, brother to Harriet, wrote: "A library is not a luxury but one of the necessities of life." My first library was housed in an old farmhouse in Livingston, New Jersey. Today, the town I grew up in bears little resemblance to the small, farming community it was in the early 1950's when we moved there. The children's room in the Livingston Public Library had been the kitchen and although it wasn't in use, the old cook stove was still there. Removing it would have been quite a project. Bookshelves lined the walls and there was a window seat where I would curl up to read while I waited for the rest of the family to select their books. Out the window I could see a few apple trees, remnants of the orchard, and beyond them, across the street, the first of what would be many new stores and offices. I worked my way around the kitchen walls reading about the March family, the Moffats, All-of-a-Kind Family, Ballet Shoes and the other shoes, Misty of Chincoteague and the other horses, and all the Landmark books.

Mrs. Ruth Rockwood was the librarian, custodian not only of the town's library, but also of much of its history. With my parents and others, she started the Livingston Historical Society. When I was about nine, I had exhausted the kitchen's offerings and she allowed me to enter the parlor and dining room's adult section! Books did not line the walls here, but were arranged in floor to ceiling stacks. The wood floors were brightly polished, although the room that had been created was a little dark'the windows had been partially obscured by all the books. I thought it was the most wonderful place in the world. Each week Mrs. Rockwood would pick out a book for me to take home and read. The first was *A Lantern in Her Hand*, a tale about a Nebraska pioneer woman written in 1928 by Bess Streeter Aldrich. I loved it and after reading that canon progressed to Frances Parkinson Keyes (including *Dinner at Antoine's*, her only mystery), and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings'Mrs. Rockwood's favorite authors, I assume. My home was filled with books and Ruth Rockwood didn't instill my love of reading, but fanned the flames. What she did instill was a lifelong passion for libraries and librarians.

Eventually the town built a fancy brick library that matched the other new municipal buildings. I was in high school by then and had transferred some of my loyalty to the LHS library and librarian, Mrs. Galford. I was a library aide with my friend, Ellen McNaught. We never minded shelving books, since we got to see what had just been returned, discovering Conrad Richter's *The Trees*, such a great book' and Mary Stewart's *Madame, Will You Talk?*, which took us to the others of this vastly underrated writer. Even now, I gravitate to the "To Be Shelved" or "Recent Returns" in my town library. It's like a smorgasbord.

I'm sure Ellen and I felt very important stamping cards with the wooden-handled date device that had to be checked each morning to make sure it was accurate. I also recall we were not above leafing through *The Dictionary of American Slang*, which was kept behind the desk, not because Mrs. Galford believed in withholding information, but because a certain group of boys was destroying the binding and causing it to flop open at several juicy entries.

Touring Wellesley College before applying, the beautiful lakeside setting was a plus; Professor David Ferry's poetry class and his recitation of Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree" an inspiration (I was ready to "Arise and go" right then and there wherever Professor Ferry might lead); but it was the library that sold me. The Rare Books Room actually has the door to 50 Wimpole Street with the brass letter slot through which Robert Browning slipped missives to Elizabeth Barrett! During exam times we used to try to get locked in the library overnight at exam times by hiding in the lavatories. The "libe"closed at an hour presumably intended to give us a decent night's sleep. The custodian always discovered us, but before he did there was a delicious sense of being almost alone with all those marvelous books.

I somehow find myself in my local library several times a week. Often it's to consult Jeanne Bracken, reference librarian extraordinaire, or I'm lured in by the thought of new books, new titles, although I have stacks of my own to read or re-read at home.

Librarians are my favorite people and libraries, my favorite places to be. I'm a member of six Friends of the Library groups. I enjoy giving talks at libraries, especially at meetings of the American Library Association, the Public Library Association, the Massachusetts Library Association'what's the collective for "librarians", as in a pride of lions, "a tome?" "a volume?"'library book festivals or fundraisers where patrons whoop it up all for the sake of words. Having just returned from Hagerstown, Maryland and their "Gala in the Stacks: Let's Jazz It Up" benefiting the Washington County Free Library Capital campaign, I really do mean "whoop." Speaking to the revelers, I mentioned the

fact that the access to libraries, and therefore information, that we enjoy in this country is rare worldwide. I can use my Minuteman Library Network card at over 40 local libraries. Simply walk in, check out a book or some other material, use their computers with no questions asked, no fee required, and nothing under lock and key. In addition to their roles as providers, librarians are also protectors.

They're a feisty bunch. I've always thought so, even before the librarian action figure came out. It's modeled on Nancy Pearl, the Seattle librarian author of *Book Lust* and *More Book Lust*. The figure's hand comes up to her lips to shush patrons, a gesture I have never seen a real librarian use. More accurate would have been a librarian waving an arm in protest. In my mind's eye, I envision librarians atop barricades, protecting our civil liberties, guarding our rights to privacy, and unbanning books.

Ultimately librarians are matchmakers. They introduce us to new authors and subjects. They connect us with needed information and, if we like, will teach us how to find it ourselves. They embrace new technology and draw us in, as well. Traveling to libraries all across the country, I have been reminded how they also function as gathering places. New libraries have small auditoria that are available to community groups for meetings and events. Comfortable places to sit and read, yes, but many libraries are adding cafes where patrons can meet for coffee. I loved my little Livingston farmhouse library and the small, gray shingled Chase Emerson Library in Deer Isle, Maine, but I admit to detours whenever I'm in town to see the McKim courtyard and Sargent murals at the Boston Public Library'the oldest municipal public library in the country and the largest'and the Rose Reading Room at The New York Public Library, pausing outside on Fifth Avenue to pat one of the stone lions, "Patience" and "Fortitude." Our jewel is the crown is, of course, The Library of Congress'again unique in the access it provides and its preservation of books and documents. (There is still a card catalogue as a backup to the Virtual one). The Great Hall is splendid. Participating in a panel at the library was an honor and memory I will always hold dear.

Libraries have functioned as centers of learning since Alexandria, but now more than ever in these economic times, they are providing instruction that individuals cannot afford to take elsewhere. Courses in ESL, literacy, computer literacy, taxes, writing of all sorts, and book groups for every taste are standard fare. Andrew Carnegie suggested "Let There Be Light" with the rays of a rising sun be set in the stone above the entrances to his free libraries. It's as apt now as it was in the 19th century. Yes, librarians are keepers of the light as well as matchmakers'and it's a match made in heaven. The dedication of this book is long overdue.