

After Hours

She had an advantage when her mama was put in charge.

By Kim Hinson

Mama wasn't supposed to be a librarian at all. She didn't have a library science degree or anything close. All she had was Miss May.

It all started one day in 1968, a few weeks after Mama decided to volunteer at the public library in Spring Valley, Minn., my hometown.

"You can be my assistant," said Miss May, choosing Mama from her assorted crew of library volunteers. "You sit at the checkout desk for a few minutes while I make some notes."

Mama watched as Miss May followed people around the library, scribbling in a little notebook she kept in her dress pocket.

"This is how I keep track of who's who and who's doing what," said Miss May later, showing Mama a page in her notebook.

"*Ruth Crandall*," Mama read. "*Hair the color of a gray tabby, just like her cats. White stripe down the middle.*"

There were a lot more notes, but Miss May pursed her lipstick lips, pulled her notebook away, and scribbled another comment. Glancing at Mama, she slid the notebook back into her pocket, adjusted the yellowed pearl necklace encircling her wrinkly neck, and said she needed to go out for a while—to check on some overdue books, she said.

When she came back an hour or so later, Miss May swished through the library door with an armload of books, some overdue, some not.

"Well, Ruth wasn't home but I went in her house anyway," Miss May told Mama, the soft folds of her Pond's Cold Cream—pampered cheeks aflush from climbing the library steps. "And you should see how many cats she keeps!" Miss May shuddered.



When Kim's mom took the helm at the library, rules were relaxed.

"But, Miss May," Mama said, her blue eyes wide, "isn't that trespassing?"

"Not if nobody sees you," Miss May said, less upstanding than she looked. "Besides, Ruth had an overdue book." Which was a good example of Miss May's logic.

People figured Miss May was somewhere around 70 years old. No one knew for sure, and she wasn't saying. She wore flowered dresses and Roseleaf face powder, but she was tough as an old boot. She used to teach home economics at the high school, but I guessed she got sick of that.

Miss May was strict about which books were allowed on her library shelves, and I liked that. Good clean Westerns by Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour were allowed. So were

old-timey, squeaky-clean romances like *Rebecca* and *Little Women*.

She weeded out any books she found that had naughty words or unsavory descriptions, like *Dracula* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and put them in a little bookcase in the closet, right next to her private bathroom. That bookcase was Miss May's equivalent of a juvenile delinquent center. Those books never got looked at or checked out. Ever. When there got to be too many, she dumped them in a trash bag and threw them away.

Miss May was also picky about who could check out what. Teenagers could still only check out books from the children's selection, which was fine by me. I never tried to check out an adult book with Miss May in charge, but I saw what happened when other kids did.

"No. I don't believe this would be a good book for you," said Miss May, and she'd quickly snap the book shut and put it in a little drawer by her knees.

Encyclopedias and rowdy children, both riddled with inappropriate words—not to mention suggestive ones—were out of the question in Miss May's library.

As an innocent girl living way out in the cornfields of Minnesota, I felt really lucky to have a librarian like Miss May around, making sure I didn't stick my nose into unsavory books where it didn't belong, and protecting me from the immorality of the real world.

One summer while Miss May was on her annual exotic vacation—this time to Egypt—the library board voted Mama to be the new librarian. When Miss May came back from Egypt, complete with pictures of herself on a camel, she wasn't the Spring Valley public librarian anymore. Mama was.

Compared to Miss May, Mama was a wild librarian.

"Sure! I'll order that new Jackie Collins book for you!" Mama said, blue eyes flashing. "And

here are three more books just like it. You can check out up to 20 books, so just take them all!"

Mama quickly filled the shelves with the newest best-sellers, like *Valley of the Dolls* and *The Happy Hooker*. She put scandalous books on a little display table with a homemade sign that said "Check Out These New Books." She ordered an entire set of encyclopedias, started up a preschool story hour, and let anyone check out anything they wanted.

The library board had to send in a carpenter to build more shelves and kid-size tables and chairs.

Mama learned the Dewey decimal system, organized the card catalog, welcomed children, and hired the poor as her assistants.

What I did was stay out of her way—and talk her into letting me go to the library after hours.

"Don't let anyone see you," she'd say. "Go in quick, lock the door, and leave all the lights off except the fake fireplace in the very back."

She handed me the key, not just to the library but to

freedom and adventure, horses, exotic animals and life far away from my small Midwestern town.

In the dark of night I slipped up the library steps and pushed the key into the keyhole, pressing hard as I turned so it wouldn't catch on whatever finicky keys catch on. Opening the heavy plate-glass door just a sliver, I slipped the key out, slid inside, closed the door and locked it again, 10 years old and slick as a cat burglar.

Tiptoeing to the very back of the library, I flicked a switch that lit the fake fireplace. Instantly, a flickering, orange-red light danced off the walls and the carpeted floor like a pioneer reading light. I fell to my knees, and then sat with my back resting against the bottom row of oversize, glossy-paged art and space books. Opening a worn copy of *Pippi Longstocking*, I leaned into the hefty tomes and sighed. ♦

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