

## Overdue

A long-overdue library book tells a poignant story of a great novel's impact on a loving family relationship. . . .

by Eric Alter

### Characters

MS. CARPENTER, *librarian*

ANDREW, *10 years old*

**TIME:** *The present.*

**SETTING:** *Maplewood Library, NJ. Backdrop may show books, posters celebrating books and reading, etc. At center is a desk with a nameplate on the front reading, GLADYS CARPENTER, HEAD LIBRARIAN. Box of tissues is on desk.*

**AT RISE:** *Seated at desk, tidying it up, is MS. CARPENTER. After a few moments she suddenly stops, spins around.*

**MS. CARPENTER** *(To someone offstage):* Sh-h-h! Sh-h-h! *(She holds up her finger to her mouth.)* Young lady, this is a library, not the local—the local—well, back in my day we would call it the corner soda shop. Keep it down, please. *(As she goes back to straighten-*

*ing up, in walks ANDREW. He carries a bag. MS. CARPENTER thinks she hears another sound. She gets up, and wags her finger back and forth at someone off stage.)* Next time I have to come over there, you will be asked to leave. *(Pauses, then quickly)* There's no need for any additional conversation, this is not a dialogue. *(She goes back to her tidying. ANDREW approaches MS. CARPENTER cautiously, then just stands there. MS. CARPENTER stops cleaning a moment. They are now staring at one another awkwardly.)* Well, young man. . .how may I help you?

**ANDREW:** Um. . .

**MS. CARPENTER:** Come now, I don't have all day.

**ANDREW:** Um. . .is this where I return books? *(She looks at him oddly.)*

**MS. CARPENTER:** Young man, do you know what this is—this place?

**ANDREW:** Uh-huh.

**MS. CARPENTER** (*Seething*): “Uh huh” is not part of the lexicon of the English language.

**ANDREW:** Huh?

**MS. CARPENTER** (*Sighing*): Young man. . .what is your name?

**ANDREW:** Andrew. Andrew Collins.

**MS. CARPENTER:** Good, now we are getting some place. Now Andrew, what is this place called?

**ANDREW:** A liberry.

**MS. CARPENTER** (*Exasperated*): Andrew, I want you to look around. (*ANDREW does so.*) Go on, take a very good look around. Do you see everything?

**ANDREW:** Mm-hmm. Yes.

**MS. CARPENTER:** Good. Now, do you see any berries?

**ANDREW** (*Confused*): Huh? (*Quickly*) I mean—what?

**MS. CARPENTER:** Do you see any berries of any kind? Blueberries? Raspberries? Strawberries? Boysenberries?

**ANDREW:** No. What’s a boysenberry?

**MS. CARPENTER:** It’s a berry. Now, this isn’t any kind of farm. . .this is a (*Enunciating*) “library.” It is not a “liberry.” It is a library.

**ANDREW:** O.K.

**MS. CARPENTER** (*Crossing her arms*): Say it, please.

**ANDREW** (*Shaking head; confused*):

Huh? (*Realizing*) Oh, O.K. It’s a (*Saying word correctly*) library.

**MS. CARPENTER** (*Smiling*): Ah, that sweet word. Please don’t ever use the word “berry” again while describing this incredible institution.

**ANDREW:** O.K.

**MS. CARPENTER:** Now. . .where were we? (*ANDREW is about to speak. MS. CARPENTER holds up a finger to him as if to say “just a moment.” She closes her eyes, then, to someone off-stage.*) Sh-h-h!

**ANDREW:** But I didn’t say anything.

**MS. CARPENTER** (*To ANDREW*): Not you. It was someone upstairs.

**ANDREW:** You can hear that far?

**MS. CARPENTER:** Andrew, I have been a librarian for a very long time. I can hear when the mice sneeze in this place. Now. . .what can I do for you? (*ANDREW looks down at the floor and all around him.*)

**ANDREW:** Well, I have this book. And well—I needed to know if this was the place to return it.

**MS. CARPENTER:** Andrew, how old are you?

**ANDREW:** Ten.

**MS. CARPENTER:** And where do you go to school?

**ANDREW:** Clinton School.

**MS. CARPENTER:** Ah, Clinton School. Ms. Exel is a wonderful librarian. I’m sure you know her. (*There is a long pause.*)

**ANDREW:** (*Tentatively*): Um. . .I'm not sure?

**MS. CARPENTER:** You do know there is a small library at your school, do you not?

**ANDREW** (*Shrugging*): I think so.

**MS. CARPENTER:** Let me ask you, Andrew. Do you know where the gym is at your school?

**ANDREW** (*Perking up*): Oh, yeah!

**MS. CARPENTER:** Just as I thought. Have you ever been in the library?

**ANDREW:** I think when we were in kindergarten.

**MS. CARPENTER:** Andrew, I find it almost shameful that you haven't been in a library since kindergarten.

**ANDREW** (*Stammering*): Well, I—

**MS. CARPENTER:** —For had you been, you would know this: a library is where one goes to read books, where one goes to read magazines, and other periodicals. It is where one goes to do research, to find out information. Do you understand that?

**ANDREW:** Sure! It's sort of like Google.

**MS. CARPENTER** (*Shuddering*): Andrew, I would like to remind you that before the end of the 20th century and the invention of the internet, people had to come to a library to find out all the information they needed. There was no Google.

**ANDREW:** Bummer.

**MS. CARPENTER:** “Bummer” is a noun; it means disappointing. I wish you would just say “disappointing”. . .it

would make you sound so much more eloquent.

**ANDREW:** Huh?

**MS. CARPENTER** (*Sighing*): Nothing. I don't know why I bother. (*ANDREW is about to speak again, but MS. CARPENTER holds up her finger.*) Sh-h-h-h.

**ANDREW** (*Whispering*): You have really good hearing.

**MS. CARPENTER** (*Matter-of-factly*): The best. My husband (*Long pause, catches her breath*) used to tell me I could hear what the kids were whispering about in their bedrooms when they were young. (*Pause*) So, back to business. What can I do for you?

**ANDREW:** So I have this book, and I need to return it. It's late. . .

**MS. CARPENTER:** All right. When did you check it out?

**ANDREW:** I um—I don't know.

**MS. CARPENTER:** You don't know? Or you don't you remember? (*Holds out hand*) Let me see the book. (*ANDREW looks at her oddly.*)

**ANDREW:** Well, I um. . .it's kind of a special. . .see, my—

**MS. CARPENTER:** All books are special. I need to see when it was taken out from here. (*ANDREW pulls book from bag, then slowly hands it to her. She looks over the book a moment. She opens it. Her eyes go wide, and she speaks a little louder than normal.*) Oh, my goodness!

**ANDREW:** Is something wrong? (*MS. CARPENTER handles the book lovingly, almost caressing it. She looks at*

ANDREW, then at the book, then back at ANDREW and then back at the book.)

MS. CARPENTER: This book, it's . . . fifty-five years—

ANDREW (*Overlapping*): Fifty-five years?! Cool!

MS. CARPENTER (*Overlapping*): Years overdue!

ANDREW: Wow. Cool. (*Nodding*) Yeah, see. . . I—

MS. CARPENTER: —Cool? Cool? Cool is something you feel. Like I feel cool, so why not put on a sweater? Or it's cool outside. Or this drink is cool and refreshing. There are many other words you can use other than cool. Such as: astonishing, awesome, brilliant, exceptional. (*Shakes her head exasperatedly.*) Andrew, this book is fifty-five years overdue! Do you understand that?

ANDREW: I think so. Is there gonna be a fine?

MS. CARPENTER (*Closing her eyes, shaking her head*): It is “is there going to be a fine,” not “gonna.” You're not outside with your friends, you're in an esteemed institution. “Gonna” is not a word. Instead you should say: Is there going to be a fine?

ANDREW: What's a steamed institution?

MS. CARPENTER (*Rolling her eyes, sternly*): You're in the town library!

ANDREW Oh, right. Sorry. My Grandpa said there might be a fine.

MS. CARPENTER: *Might* be?! Fifty-five years. (*Pause*) Do you know this book?

ANDREW: *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

MS. CARPENTER: Yes!

ANDREW (*Shrugging*): Not really. . . I just know my Grandpa loves this book. (*Something has changed in MS. CARPENTER for the moment. She looks at him calmly.*)

MS. CARPENTER: May I ask you. . . what are you doing with this book?

ANDREW: Well. . . see. . . my Grandpa was doing some cleaning. (*Nervously*) I mean, me and—I mean, my Mom and I. . . we. . . we're doing some cleaning. And see, we cleaned out his whole house.

MS. CARPENTER: I see.

ANDREW: And we found all of these books. We had a garage sale to get rid of them. Because he's moving. . . into some home. . . I think it's called a senior home or something. He doesn't want to go.

MS. CARPENTER: Oh, I see.

ANDREW: My Grandma died about a year ago. . . and he's real sad. . . and well, I don't think he can live alone anymore. I mean, he's fine and all, but I think my Grandma did a lot for him when she was alive. Well, I mean, they both did a lot for each other and stuff, but. . . my Mom can't take care of him anymore, so she thought it would be best if he went to this place.

MS. CARPENTER: This senior home?

ANDREW (*Nodding*): Yeah. (*Shrugs*) He'll be really close. It's right here in Maplewood.

MS. CARPENTER: Sunrise Hills?