

**Bookends**  
By Jenny L. Smith

Ellen Montgomery woke up to a snow-covered stoop and a knee-high pile of westerns. Her head shook at the sight as her eyes soaked in their presence.

The teetering stack of books leaned close to the door, hovering under the protection of the archway safe from the snow, and when she stepped outside and scooped them into her arms, a warmth radiated through her woolen coat.

Perhaps it was strange to have a small library appear on your own front step, but Ellen was well accustomed to such strangeness. These days, they all were.

She slipped the books into her old canvas bag and continued down the steps, leaving her house behind. The sun was up peeking through the frosted pines as she walked down the driveway, passing the stationary automobile that resided there.

Ohio winters had a way of keeping people indoors, and this morning was no different. Ellen walked down the bare sidewalk alone, the bag gently swinging forward and back while her mind compiled a list. It was a growing list, more like wishes and greedy prayers, because somehow butter had appeared at the top of her mind today. Out of all the worries and troubles the world had handed out, Ellen's mind was stuck on butter and the absence of it on her toast.

Guilt coated her stomach as her hand covered her other hand. Even through the leather of her glove, she could feel the pointiness of a ring gently poking into her palm.

"Make do, can do," she whispered to herself.

Her thoughts returned to her steps.

Many of the buildings she passed were still dim, her eyes taking in the darkened windows and the posters that pressed against the glass. Somedays the town looked completely the same to her, but other days she'd notice the details, the little changes that painted the buildings in a declaration of war – the signs, the ration notices, reminders about rubber and gas and whatever else was needed.

But somewhere in between the cluster of ordinary brick was a familiar door. Her shoulders relaxed as she dug in her pocket for the key, turning the metal until she heard the soft click of the lock.

Warmth was not immediate, but the wind was absent inside. Ellen kept her scarf wrapped snug around her neck as she moved deeper into the darkened space, turning on the nearby lamps as she weaved around shelves and tables. The smell of paper and age wafted through the room, Ellen's boots tapping against the hardwood floors. It was a familiar rhythm, one that was almost as warm as her scarf.

She lingered around a wide oak desk, her fingers touching a stack of books already sitting there waiting for her, but then she noticed the amber glow.

The small library did not have much in the means of modern conveniences, but the office in the back had plenty of light, primarily because of the tree of a lamp Ellen had squeezed inside the tiny space.

As she walked toward the brightness, her mind grew curious, her ears catching the rattles of movement filling the room.

*Mice?* Ellen wondered.

Then she heard a loud thump.

*No, more like elephants.*

The door of the office was propped open by a book cart. Ellen stepped around it, her head craning around the door frame.

Inside was a young woman hunched over a box, her auburn hair unpinned flowing over her eyes as her hands sifted through the contents of the box.

“Josie?”

Wide eyes lifted to Ellen’s.

“Mrs. Montgomery.”

Suddenly, Josie was standing, her skirt disheveled, her necklace swinging like a pendulum.

“I didn’t hear you.”

“That’s quite alarming, my dear. I have very loud footsteps.”

Boxes were everywhere, separating the two librarians. But Ellen had carved out a path earlier in the week and she maneuvered to her desk successfully. She lowered her canvas bag to the surface.

“You alright, Josie?”

The young woman tugged on her necklace, her hand covering the silver pendant as she pulled it from one side to the other. Her words stayed in her mouth, like they often did, but she bobbed her head.

“I have more books.”

Ellen gestured to her bag.

“You know, when the chairman of the book drive announced books could be dropped off at the librarians’ homes, I thought people would knock or call ahead. But I guess doorstep deliveries work too.”

Ellen smiled, but Josie didn’t say anything. She just took the bag and gently dumped it onto the closed top of a nearby box. Ellen watched her pick up each book, patting their covers as if they were small children.

“Did you collect the donations from the Mayor’s office? And from the bank?”

“Yes.”

“And you went through all the boxes in here?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Very good.”

Ellen’s eyes scanned across the boxes, many of them heavier than what she could carry. At the start of the Victory Book Drive, she had expected they would collect a box or two from the community, not a whole dozen.

*Nothing is as lovely as giving a story*, she thought.

She wondered how many pages would be turned, how many miles they’d travel, and if one soldier in particular would find one of the books from her library in his hands.

“Well, they will be here in an hour to collect the books. Shall we finish up?”

Josie had turned into a statue, a beautiful unmoving one gripping her necklace against her palm. She was looking at Ellen, but her eyes were staring right on through.

Suddenly, a nervousness gripped Ellen’s chest.

There were different kinds of silence and this one was sharp and long. The kind of gap that took all the air out of the room. She studied Josie’s face looking for traces of truth, afraid she would find them. Terrified actually. Because outside their little library, was a tattered, ever-changing world that seemed to be constantly tipping on its head.

But Josie’s eyes were dry, and Ellen allowed herself to take a breath again.

“Josie, what is wrong?”

The young librarian brushed a thick strand of auburn hair from her eyes tucking it behind her ear, her startled gaze now in full view.

“Your book is gone.”

Her voice was a whisper, soft, merely there. But the weight of the words sunk down into Ellen’s core until they were fully felt.

In a building of books, one solitary story was small. Yet Ellen’s legs moved back to her desk, her hands running across the smooth oak surface, searching for what was not there.

“It was here, Josie. Just yesterday. I forgot to put it in my purse before I left, but it was on this desk.”

“I had the boxes on your desk...I was sorting books, then packing them and...”

The young woman’s hands waved in the air, then folded together.

“I’m so sorry.”

The library couldn’t have been any quieter. They both stood in the tiny office with boxes surrounding them, no words to share. Josie kept pulling at her necklace the movement making Ellen’s disposition worse. She blinked her eyes wildly as if the light was too bright, then redirected the toil of panic bubbling inside of her to something of use.

A plan. An action.

“Alright,” Ellen said, sucking in a deep breath.

“We just need to go through all the boxes again and make sure it’s not inside.”

A week’s worth of work was undone as they tore into the taped lids with blades. Ellen positioned herself on the floor, her wet boots tucking under her knees, her scarf still around her neck, as she peered inside the first box.

The books were neatly arranged in snuggled piles organized by genre. Adventures, westerns, non-fiction. All acceptable genres for the cause. Of course, not all the donations they received were in these boxes. Ellen and Josie had to sift out the inappropriate. Not that *Mrs. Allen on Cooking, Menus, Service* was an unfit cookbook (or the dozens of other like books). It just wasn’t well-suited for hungry soldiers in a warzone.

A few of the books were worn, repaired with a little bit of glue on their spines (courtesy of Josie) and Ellen was careful to keep all the books in the order they had stacked them. But she made sure her eyes scanned every cover, looking for ink stains and the olive green binding.

Her book was not in this box.

Nor the second, third, and fourth.

“I am so sorry, Mrs. Montgomery. I know what that book means to you and I don’t know...I thought I was being so careful.”

Josie sat on the floor in the corner, her shoulders slumped, her forearms hanging over the side of another box. The ring around the young librarian’s finger caught the light, and Ellen’s core softened at the gleam.

“For the love of stories, Josie, please call me Ellen.”

The two women had nine years of age separating them, a gap that was wide at times but lately had narrowed. Maybe it was the rings they both wore around their left fingers, or how one of them would be in a daze shelving books and the other would just nod in understanding. Or perhaps it was last week when Josie realized it was her mother-in-law’s birthday and she had no butter left to make a cake. Ellen spared her with the last stick of butter she had.

Their stories were parallel, running like two rivers down to the same stream. No matter their differences or their age, they were still wives who just wanted their husbands home.

Ellen stood to her feet. The last box held all their hope in its flimsy cardboard walls. They both hovered over it silently until Ellen pulled it open. Josie took the left side, Ellen the right.

Her hands were shaking and she hated the feel of a quake gripping her fingers.

*It's just a book,* Ellen thought.

But the book was like Josie's necklace. The thing that kept her standing in an unstable world.

"Ellen."

Josie's voice was firm.

Ellen raised her head to see the olive green book in Josie's hands.

"It's here."

A sound of relief rushed through the young woman and carried through Ellen. The faded cover was scuffed and blotted in smudges of ink, and Ellen instantly scooped it up from Josie.

She flipped the book open, inspecting the creased pages. But then she found what she was looking for, familiar handwriting scrolling across the inside page. Her fingers traced the words, touching every letter.

*To my Ellen, the keeper of stories.*

Henry was here. The half crossed "t"s and the looping "e"s. Her husband's forever ink-stained hands pressed against the worn cover.

"I don't know why I brought this to work," she said, her eyes still on the book.

She supposed she liked the idea of carrying something with her other than memories and promises.

But Josie didn't respond. She was already packing up the books again, re-taping the lids.

"I made you muffins to take home. I put them up at the main desk."

"How? I didn't give you that much butter, Josie."

"I know. But I stretched it."

"And how does one stretch butter?"

Josie shrugged.

"By making a very dry cake for my mother-in-law. She still ate it though."

A smile spread across her face. It reached Ellen's too.

"Some things are just too important."

Ellen happened to agree.

She joined Josie, side by side, closing up each box one by one.

They had books to deliver. Stories to give. And maybe halfway around the world in the darkest of moments, a page would be turned and the words would stick.

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**Author's Note:** The Victory Book Drive was a nationwide effort during World War II. In fact, according to local newspaper archives, several libraries in Wayne County participated. (All characters in the story are fictional.)