

1863

By Marilyn Reeves

I was rummaging through the Rare Books section of the downtown library when I happened upon a slender volume, whose beige linen cover was nearly in tatters. The front showed a sepia-toned picture of Abraham Lincoln and the year: 1863.

The pages inside featured dozens of lithographed portraits of soldiers from the Civil War. The captions were in such fine print and so faded that I would need a magnifying glass to decipher them. Thinking of asking the librarian if she might have one, I must have stood up – too quickly – and fainted.

When I awoke I was lying on a grassy lawn next to a rail fence. The ground was thrumming with the sound of marching feet, led by the ratta-tat-tat of a snare drum. But the men who passed by were all dressed in rags. Some were barefoot, and some couldn't march at all, but were being supported by others who could barely walk themselves.

After they passed by, I heard a man's voice hollering: "Hey, missy! What you doin' in this here yard?" I turned to see an elderly man walking toward me. "You some kinda spy, missy? Who are you anyway? What you doin' here?"

"Oh, I really don't know," I said. "Where is 'here'? Where am I?"

Then I heard a woman's voice calling from the porch. "George? George! Who you talkin' to out there?"

"I dunno, Miz Lawson. She won't tell me her name. I think she's plumb crazy, if you ask me."

The woman approached and said, "So, who might you be, Miss, and what are you doing here napping on my front lawn?"

"My name's ... Mary," I said. "And I have no idea how I got here. I must have blacked out while I was at the library and woke up on your lawn. If you would be so kind as to call a cab to take me to the airport, I'd be most grateful."

"A cab? You mean a carriage? I'm sorry but all of the horses and conveyances have been put to use in the war effort. And where's that you said you wanted to go? Air-something?"

"Airport. If I could just get to the airport, I could fly home and be out of your hair ..."

"Well, if that don't beat all! You're just going to *fly* home, right, honey?" The woman threw back her head and shrieked with laughter. "Well, Old George here is right. You really *are* crazy!"

I thought for a moment and then said, "How about a train? Is there a train here that would take me to Denver?"

"Denver! You're from Denver? Way out West with the cowboys and Indians?"

"Well, yes ... with the ... cowboys and Indians."

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t help you. There might still be trains running out of Charlotte, but it would be a long walk for you to get to the city. And there are men still fighting all along the road here. You’re likely to get killed, or ... worse. Why don’t you come on in and have some soup, then maybe we can figure something out.”

“Alright. Thank you. Just let me grab my book.”

But the moment I picked up the little book, it changed! It was now sporting a slick, modern jacket, and the flyleaf inside said it was published in 2009.

When I looked up again, the librarian was staring at me with concern in her eyes. And she bore a remarkable resemblance to Mrs. Lawson.