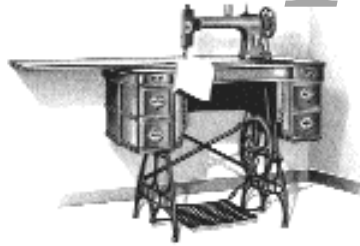


CHAPTER

No. 1



“I wish I still had a bedroom,” said Ellen, using her teeth to snip the thread with which she was sewing. “Will I ever have my own room again?”

“Don’t bite your thread,” said her mother. “It’s bad for your teeth. Here, use the scissors.”

Ellen did as she was told. But her mother hadn’t answered her question.

“I suppose . . . ,” Ellen said slowly, “if Grandpa died, then I’d get his room.”

“Hush, Ellen!” said her mother. “Don’t even

say such a thing. It was very good of Grandpa Sanders to let us come and live with him when we just couldn't pay our rent any longer. There are lots of out-of-work families who would be happy to be living the way we are. We're very lucky."

But Ellen didn't feel lucky. She hadn't felt lucky for months, not since her father had lost his job at the bank. Now they were living in Grandpa Sanders's small house, which had only two bedrooms—so Ellen had to sleep on the couch at night.

And there were other things that Ellen would have liked to complain about. Like having to always be quiet so as not to disturb Grandpa. Like never having a nickel for an ice cream cone on a hot day. Like losing all her friends from her old neighbourhood. There wasn't anyone her age to play with on Grandpa's street. No one at all. And no way to go back to see her old friends, on the other side of Vancouver, since there wasn't any money for bus fare either.

Ellen picked out a thread from the used ones laid out on the dining-room table and started on another seam. She wouldn't have minded helping her mother to sew if they had been working on something pretty for her to wear. But this was material from one of her grandmother's dresses that her mother was using to make a dress for her. Her dead grandmother. That was sort of spooky, Ellen thought.

Ellen wriggled in her seat. When she finished this seam she'd say she had to go to the bathroom again. Ellen had one of her library books stashed in there. Or maybe her mother would even let her make some lemonade. If there was any sugar, that is . . .

Suddenly, outside, Ellen heard a rumbling.

"What's that?" she said. "It sounds like a truck. Are we getting something delivered?"

"Of course not," said her mother. "What would we be getting?"

But Ellen had already dropped her sewing and run to the window. "It is a truck," she told her

mother. “An old pickup truck with some baskets in the back. Oh—and there’s a girl getting out. And she’s got a little suitcase with her. She’s going up to the house next door! Look!”

By now Ellen’s mother had come to stand by the window too. “Yes, I see,” she said.

“She looks just about my age! Do you think she’s coming to live there? Oh Mom, can I go out and ask her if she’s going to be living there?”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Ellen. Let’s wait just a bit—we mustn’t be nosy.”

“I’m not being nosy. I’m just being friendly. Oh-h-h, it’s too late.” Ellen’s face fell. “She’s gone in now. And the man who was driving has gone in too.”

“Never mind, dear,” said her mother. “If she is living next door you’ll have lots of chances to talk to her.”

Her mother went back to her chair in front of the old treadle sewing machine. Ellen stayed at the window. She saw the man who had been driving return to the truck and take a basket from

the back. It seemed to be full of potatoes, and she pressed her nose against the window to see better.

“Ellen, now you *are* being nosy,” her mother cautioned her. “Come and finish that bit of basting, please. I’m ready to do it on the machine.”

With one last glance out the window Ellen went back to her chair. She took a few more long stitches—too long, Ellen suspected, but she didn’t stop to correct them. “There. It’s done,” she said.

She handed the slightly crumpled material to her mother and then picked up a dress that was lying on the table. The dress was one of hers, a flowered one that she liked and had worn a lot. But it was much too short for her now, so her mother had let down the hem. Only, because she’d worn it so much, the rest of the dress was faded. Only the fabric of the hem was still bright. Ellen held it up and frowned at it.

“This dress looks weird now, with a bright strip all around the bottom,” she said.

She walked into the bedroom with it and held it up against her as she stared into the mirror. She

was still frowning when she came back to the dining room.

“Isn’t there some way that we can fade the bright part?” she asked her mother. “Maybe leave the dress out in the sun? If we covered the old part and just left the hem showing, then maybe it would get faded too.”

Her mother smiled at the suggestion. “I don’t think that would work, really.”

“Well, we’ll have to do *something*. I don’t want to look weird and have kids laugh at me. Especially since I have to start a new school here.”

“Oh Ellen, I’m sure you won’t be laughed at,” her mother said gently. “I’m sure there will be lots of other girls in dresses with let-down hems. And you’ll have this new one we’re making—you can wear that for your first day.”

Ellen was still looking unhappily at her dress. “But Mom . . . ,” she said, “Daddy’s working again, now that he’s found that cleaning job at the factory. So how come we still don’t have any money for things?”

“Well, he doesn’t make very much at the factory, even though it’s hard work,” her mother explained. “And we have to buy food, and give Grandpa Sanders money for the electricity and taxes and all the other house expenses.”

“I don’t see why we have to do that,” Ellen grumbled. She kept her voice low and glanced over at the door to the living room. Grandpa Sanders was in there, reading the newspaper. “After all, he’d still have to pay taxes and electricity, whether we were here or not.”

“But we *want* to help with the expenses,” said her mother. “Neither Daddy nor I want him to feel we’re taking advantage of him.”

“Is that what he thinks we’re doing?” said Ellen. “Is that why he’s often cross, especially with me? I don’t think he likes me much,” she added.

“Oh Ellen, of course he likes you,” her mother assured her. “It’s just that he’s not used to having us all living with him. And besides, his arthritis is really painful some days—that’s why he’s cranky.”

Her mother started the sewing machine going

again, and its noisy whirr drowned out any more talk. There was lots more Ellen would have liked to ask about. She still didn't understand what the Depression was all about. People talked about the Depression all the time (the word always had a big black capital D in Ellen's mind). But she still couldn't understand just *why* everyone was so poor now.

Her mother had told her that it had all started ten years ago, back in 1929, when the stock market had crashed in New York. But that didn't seem like much of an explanation to Ellen. Why should something that happened in New York make all of Canada so poor? Ellen's father had never owned any stocks. And the bank he'd worked for was still standing—there just wasn't a job for him any more.

"There, that's the top done." Her mother's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Come and let me try it on you."

Ellen went over and stood while her mother tried the top of her dress on her.

"That's fine," her mother said. "And the puffed sleeves will look really nice on you."

Her mother was trying to cheer her up, Ellen knew. Only Ellen wasn't in a mood to find anything nice.

"But it's such a dull colour," she said. "Just a dull old grey check—an old lady's colour."

Her mother made no reply to that, and Ellen went back to her chair.

Oh, if only some fairy godmother could change my life, she thought with a sigh.