

*Marie-Claire hugged her nightgown* against her skin as she scampered down the stairs to the outhouse in the back lane. It was the warmest nightgown she had ever owned, but the wind still crept inside it and curled around her legs and neck. She should have taken time to grab the shawl from its hook by the door.

Inside the small wooden shack, Marie-Claire was protected from the wind and stopped shivering for long enough to lift her nightgown and do her business. But she was certainly not as warm as she had been when using the toilet inside the wealthy English girl's house. There the toilet sat in a special room with a bathtub and a sink, both with their taps full of warm water. In the outhouse, the wind found its way through cracks between the boards. As soon and as quickly as she could, Marie-Claire skittered across the frozen laneway, back to the house.

Maman had been up for some time and had already lit the fire. After warming herself at the wood stove, Marie-Claire pulled on her grey woollen dress. She thought again of Laura and wondered which of the many pretty dresses in her closet she would be wearing today. Staying at Laura's home, after her run-in with the Waterfords' horse, had been like visiting a different country. So large were the rooms, so luxurious the indoor plumbing. So many beautiful *things* there were everywhere—like the angel on the tree that Marie-Claire had glimpsed for only a moment.

“Can we get a Christmas tree this year, Maman?” Marie-Claire asked.

Maman laughed and tossed a slice of bread into the sizzling pan.

Marie-Claire wondered what Laura was doing now. Giving away her lovely nightgown had been very generous. Marie-Claire wished she could give Laura something in return. A Christmas present. But what?

She thought about it all day at school but still had no idea as Sister Chantal waved the girls out the door. “*Au revoir,*” the nun called out. “*Joyeux Noël.*” There would be no more school now until January. No more adding and subtracting—too bad. No more memory work—*hourra!*

Without stopping to think about why she was not going home, Marie-Claire headed across the city instead of down the hill to her own street. Snow had fallen throughout the day, and many horses were now pulling sleighs instead of carriages. Marie-Claire kept well clear of their path. When she remembered how the Waterford horse had descended upon her, her heart still beat fast!

Perhaps, she thought, if she got more than one candy at New Year's, she could take Laura a piece. Marie-Claire skidded across an ice rink, her injured wrist tucked carefully inside her coat. As she zipped along, she dodged the people on real skates. Laura probably had real skates.

And Laura would probably receive lots of candy herself.

Starting up the hill, Marie-Claire slowed her steps. Everyone now was speaking English. The houses were large and so very far apart. How oddly out of place she felt in this neighbourhood, and yet at the same time she felt drawn to it.

Maybe a clothespin doll like the one she had made for Emilie last spring would make a nice present for Laura. Emilie had certainly loved hers.

But then, Emilie had been much younger than Laura and had never seen a doll like the one in Laura's room. In front of Laura's house, Marie-Claire stopped. If she had a gift with her, she could knock on the door right now. Perhaps she would be invited inside. Perhaps Laura would ask her to stay and play. Behind which of the many windows were Laura's bedroom and her doll and her snow globe?

As she tried to figure it out, the front door opened. Wearing fancy hats and coats, Laura's parents stepped out to the fine carriage awaiting them.

Marie-Claire turned away and began to run.

What would a girl who owned a doll with real hair, a red silk dress, stockings, and shoes want with a clothespin dressed in a scrap of cloth? Marie-Claire ran until she had a stitch in her side, then kept on running. There was nothing a *poor little French girl* could give to a girl like Laura. Oh, how those words still stung.

Comfortably back near her own home, Marie-Claire slowed down to catch her breath. On only a few houses did she see the awful black-and-yellow SMALLPOX/LA PICOTTE notices that had hung in so many places through the summer and fall. It seemed, as Louis said, that the epidemic was almost over.

By the side of a church, as she walked along, Marie-Claire spotted a patch of untrampled snow. She looked around to make sure no nuns were nearby. What she was about to do, they would consider most unladylike. Marie-Claire stepped from the walkway onto the fresh snow. Carefully, she turned and lay down flat on her back. So cold it was, the snow on her neck and on the bare wrist of her good arm. But after her long run, she didn't mind a bit. She gazed up at the blue sky that seemed to suggest anything was possible. Together and apart, together and apart, Marie-Claire swished her legs, at the same time sliding one arm up and down through the snow till her limbs tingled.

She stood up, brushed the snow from her clothing as best she could, and turned to admire her *étoile de mer*. Her starfish in the snow looked, she thought, rather like a lopsided angel. It reminded her of the angel on the tree at Laura's house.

There must be *something* nice she could give to Laura. If only she could think what it would be.