

*Penny pulled her nightcap down over her ears, the quilt up to her chin, and burrowed deep under the blankets. Except for Emily's murmuring on the other side of the bed, and Maggie's squeaky baby sounds from her cradle, all was quiet.*

The sun would be up soon. The curtains would have to be pulled back if the morning light was to fill the room. But it was so cold! Penny dithered, counted to three, crawled over Emily, leapt out of bed, sped across the room, and

flung back the curtains. Hopping from one foot to the other, she pressed her nose against the frosty glass. It was black as pitch outside. The cobbled stones of Macara Street shimmered beneath the beam of a street light. It was December 6, and it still hadn't snowed. Two soldiers on horseback clomped on by. Soldiers were a common enough sight, since Wellington Barracks was just down the road. "They must be cold too," Penny thought, as she hurled herself back into bed and plunged under the covers to wait for daylight.

The back door downstairs squeaked. Papa was up and about. Penny could hear him fill up the scuttle with coal and toss it into the kitchen stove. Then the kettle landed on the stovetop with a thud. Now, Penny thought, Papa would wind Mama's clock, which stood on the mantel over the fire. Papa gave the clock three sharp grinds. Right on time! Penny giggled. You could know a lot about the world, if you were very still, if you listened hard enough.

It didn't take long for the heat from the stove to rise up and warm the bedroom. Penny loved their bedroom but the kitchen was the nicest room in the house, and their house was the nicest house in Halifax, no, in the world! She had helped Mama paint and wall paper the kitchen and the parlour too. They had made it a warm, welcoming home.

Papa had never liked it when Mama did heavy work. Said it wasn't fitting, her being a lady and all. "A lady?" Mama had teased him. "Since when has moving a paintbrush back and forth been considered heavy work?" She used to say that she was the happiest person in Halifax, and if he kept on at her, he would only make her miserable. Then he'd laugh too. Sometimes he'd swing Mama around the kitchen and her long blond hair would unravel from the bun at the back of her head and fall onto her shoulders. Emily had been littler then, like Maggie was now. Back then, Maggie had just been a lump in Mama's tummy.

A lady. Penny thought on that. Mama had come from an important family in Halifax. Mama's papa had been rich, but he was dead now. Mama's own mother, Penny's grandmother, was still alive, although she had moved to a grand house in Montreal just after Mama married Papa. Penny was named after her Grandmother Penelope. She shuddered. It was a silly, old-fashioned name. What she wouldn't give to be called Lily or May. Besides, Grandma Penelope had never even acknowledged her existence.

Papa's family lived across the sea in Ireland, all except his sister in Toronto. The only family Penny really knew was Aunt Colleen, Mama's cousin. Aunt Colleen had a brother named Robert. He drove a great big automobile. He said that she should call him Robert, not Uncle Robert. He said uncles were all old, stodgy fellows with moustaches. He was young and far too good-looking. He made her laugh. But it was Aunt Colleen she remembered most. Penny whispered the name in the dark. *Collll-eeeeee-nnnn*. It

rolled off her tongue just right. After Mama had married Papa, no one from Mama's family would talk to her, no one except Aunt Colleen and Robert. Then Aunt Colleen had moved to Montreal to live with Grandmother Penelope.

Penny heard Papa open a cupboard door, close it again and take the kettle off the stove. He'd be making himself a mug of tea before he left for work. Papa worked hard. He had to, he said. Halifax was booming what with all the war work. Papa had his own business. He was an (Penelope paused to think of the words) independent contractor. That was right. He built the insides of buildings, the innards he said. He always laughed when he said that. But Papa didn't laugh so much now, not since Mama died.

Tips of morning light began to push back the night sky. Soon Papa would be out the door and she'd not see him again until nightfall. Then she had an idea. If she hurried she could make Papa breakfast. Penny flipped back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Emily

grunted and curled up like a cooked shrimp. While one hand reached for her robe, Penny's toes searched the floor very carefully for her slippers. Emily was only five years old and didn't always push the po back under the bed.

"Penny, where are you going?" Emily mumbled from the other side of the bed.

"Don't wake up," Penny whispered, "it's too early."

"I'm cold," she murmured.

"Hush, now. You'll wake the baby. Go back to sleep."

Penny cast an eye over to Maggie's cradle. Her fat little feet were already touching the end. It was time she went into a proper crib. Maggie's first birthday wasn't far off. But how would they be able to celebrate knowing that it was the same day Mama died?



With her robe tied firmly around her, Penny yanked off her bed cap and looped an old, frayed ribbon around her long hair. Almost instantly strands of hair came loose. “Oh drat,” she sighed in frustration. She hated her hair. It never did what she wanted it to do. It was long, almost to her waist, and it was red! “Auburn,” Papa called it. “Beautiful Irish hair.” It didn’t seem fair that both Maggie and Emily had Mama’s soft blond hair, and Mama’s pretty looks, too.

There was nothing Penny liked about her looks. Mrs. Hanson, the lady who lived two doors down and cared for Maggie and Emily while Penny went to school, said that she was “a long drink of water.” Then she’d say to anyone who’d listen, “And would ya’ look at the child’s colouring! A ghost has more to say for itself.”

It was true, she was skinny, bony like a bicycle, all knobs and spokes. And, to top it off, she had green eyes! “Irish eyes,” Papa said. Ireland, Penny grumbled, had to be filled with funny-looking girls.

Penny crept out of the bedroom, padded down the stairs and walked into the kitchen.

“Morning, Papa.”

“Sure, darlin’, it’s too early. Back to bed with you.” Papa spoke kindly. His smile went all the way up to his eyes.

“But I want to make you some breakfast.” Penny reached into the larder and pulled out a basket of eggs.

Mrs. Hanson was always saying, “That man is too thin. He needs fattening up.”

“I’ve made the porridge, that will do me right,” Papa insisted.

Mama’s clock struck the quarter hour.

Even if she couldn’t make him breakfast Penny didn’t want to go back to bed. She hardly ever had Papa to herself. Then she saw it.

“What’s that?” Penny pointed to a large, brown box on the kitchen table.

“I was just about to put that away but...” Papa dithered. He pushed back a shock of salt-and-pepper hair and grinned. “No reason why you

can't have it now."

"For me?" Penny all but threw herself on the box. It wasn't even her birthday, and Christmas was weeks away!

"Easy now." He smiled again as he picked up his tea and eased himself into the rocking chair by the stove.

Penny tore off the top of the box and peered inside. Carefully, as carefully as if she were unwrapping the finest china, Penny folded back the tissue paper. Her breath all but left her.

"Papa!" This was too much! Too expensive. Too pretty. Too everything!

"It's time you had a proper dress. Your mother would have wanted you to have it," said Papa, his voice barely above a whisper.

"But a store-bought dress!" Penny lifted the dress out of the box and held it against her. It was blue, the colour of Mama's eyes, and belted just below the waist, with a bit of lace at the throat. It was a lady's dress.

"There's more." Papa pointed to the box.

“Underthings and all. The saleslady said you’d be needing them.” For reasons Penny didn’t quite understand, Papa turned pink.

Penny peered back into the box and touched the petticoat.

“You’ll be needing a hat, and shoes, but those will have to be fitted proper,” said Papa as he took a sip of his tea.

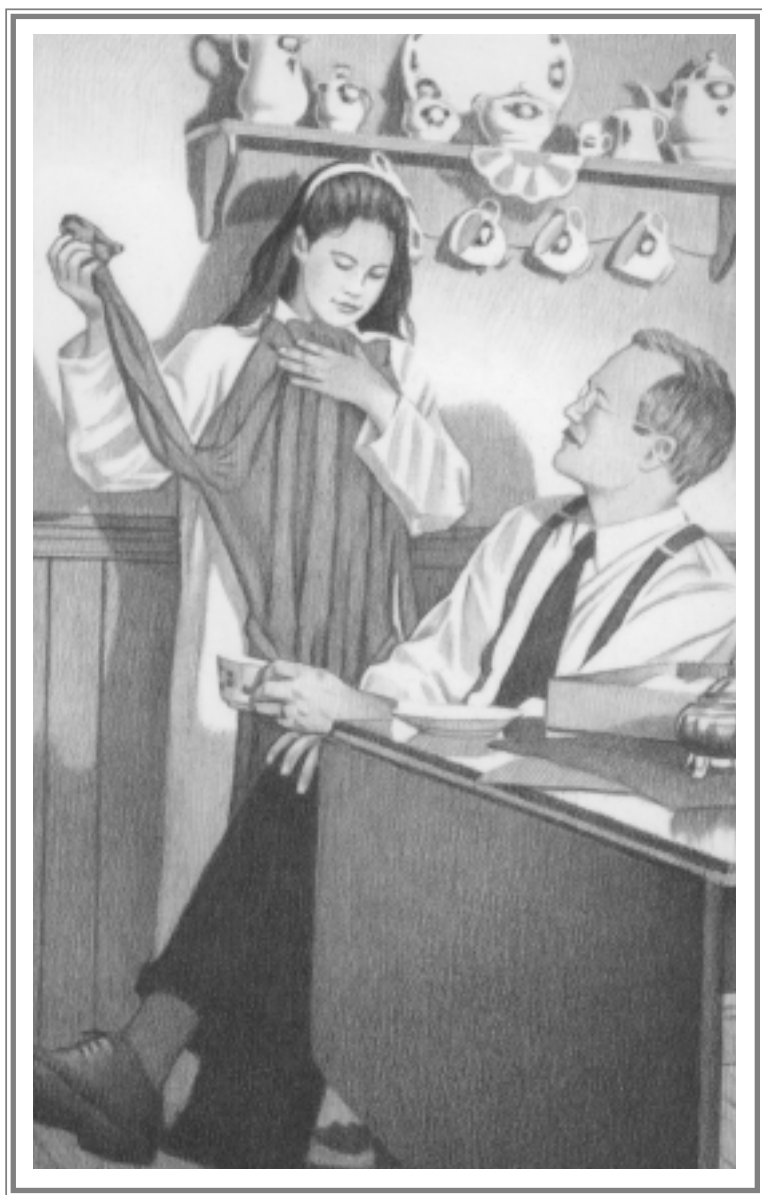
A thought started to creep into her mind. What was it for? Why would she be needing a store-bought dress? She had two dresses as it was, and a dress for church. That was more than most girls her age had. And then she knew, and the knowledge made her knees tremble. Penny pitched the dress back in the box.

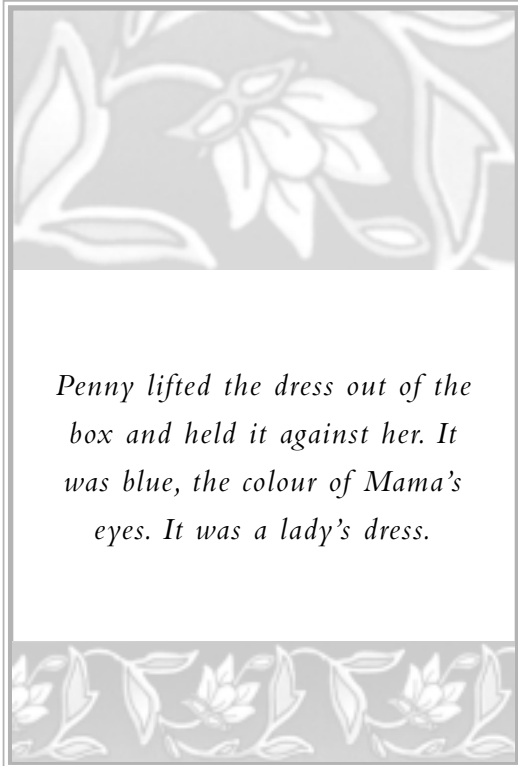
“What’s wrong? Don’t you like it?” Papa asked, his voice rising.

Penny spun around. It was all she could do not to shout.

“What’s it for?” Her eyes brimmed with tears.

“Oh, Penny.” Papa leaned back into the rocker. With a long, slow breath he said, “I’ve received a





*Penny lifted the dress out of the box and held it against her. It was blue, the colour of Mama's eyes. It was a lady's dress.*

letter from your grandmother.”

That’s it! She was right. He meant to send her away. He meant her to go and live with Grandmother Penelope in Montreal. Tears bubbled up and slid down her face. Her lips quivered.

“I won’t go!” The words spilled out of her with such force that she stumbled forward and gripped the edge of the table. “Why? Why do you want me to go?”

“Come here, love.” Papa held out his arms.

“No! You don’t love me.” Her words hung in the air like laundry on the line, going nowhere, just hanging.

“Penny.”

“No. No.” Penny thumped down onto a kitchen chair and covered her face with her hands.

“Ach, darlin’, hear me out,” Papa said softly. “You’re a beautiful wee girl. A father never had a more lovely daughter. And I love ya’ more than life itself. But you have so much ahead of you, school, maybe university. Your mother and I

talked about our daughters going to the university. Sure, can ya' think on that, what it would mean for a man like myself to have educated daughters? But here, livin' like this . . .”

“Like what?” Penny interrupted. “Mama loved this house. It’s a fine house.”

Penny looked past her father and caught the edge of a roll of blueprints that were on top of the kitchen cupboards. They were for the house Papa had been going to build for Mama. It would have been the most beautiful house in Halifax, Papa said so. If only Mama hadn’t died and Maggie hadn’t been born. Tears spilled down Penny’s face.

“Penny, listen to me.” Papa braced himself as though he was trying to steel himself against a north wind. “You’re doing work meant for a grown woman, taking care of babies, running a house. It’s not right. You should be living with someone who can tell you what a young girl needs to know, about woman things. And now, with your grandmother’s letter...” Papa ran his

hands through his hair. “Your Aunt Colleen is in Montreal. You like her, don’t you? Sure, your own mother loved her dearly. And your grandmother says that you’ll go to a good girls’ school. You’ll be raised like a lady. You’ll meet fine people in Montreal.”

“What about Maggie and Emily? Who will take care of them?” Penny glared at her father with marble-hard eyes.

“Mrs. Hanson will, same as she does now. Business is good,” Papa carried on. “Soon I’ll be able to afford help full time. Someone to come in like, and take care of the house too.”

“You’ll get married again. That’s what Mrs. Hanson says. She says that Margie Flynn has her cap set on you.” Penny’s words came out in sputters.

Papa laughed. To Penny it felt like a slap in the face.

“Oh my love, is that what you think? That I’m getting rid of you to marry someone?” Papa stopped laughing and looked at her steadily. “Come here.”

Slowly she walked over to her father and crumpled into his lap. He rocked her back and forth, as though she were a baby and not all of ten years old.

“When your mother came into my life I thought that I’d been kissed by an angel. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.”

Penny nodded. Mama used to tell the story as though it were a fairytale. She’d make it sound as though she’d been a prisoner princess locked up in a castle, and only Papa’s love had set her free.

“There I was, a man just starting out, an Irishman at that. I was doing work on a grand house. Most grand folks don’t take too kindly to the Irish.”

Penny nodded again. It was true. Even in the street they lived on, she heard people say “the dirty Irish.” Why? Papa wasn’t dirty.

“Poor folk and posh folk don’t mix, you know that. And all I had to offer her was my heart. But it was enough. She was as kind and as good as she was lovely,” Papa whispered. “Penny darlin’, if I

have one wish for my girls it's that you three find the love your mother and I had. Marry again? Where on God's earth would I find someone who could hold a candle to her?"

It was then that Penny realized how lonely he must be.

"Papa, I miss her too."

"I know you do, my darlin'. But she's here. I know that she's lookin' out for us." Papa gave her a hug just as Mama's clock struck five. "There now, the men will be waiting on me. Sure, it wouldn't do for the boss to come in late, now would it?" Papa kissed the top of Penny's head and eased her up onto her feet. "You go to your bed now. Run along."

Penny struggled to stand up. She was bone-weary, as though the day had already been spent.

Papa put on his winter jacket, wrapped a muffler around his throat and pulled on his gloves. "We'll talk more tonight, all right?"

There was nothing Penny could do but nod.

Papa opened the door and was gone.

She ran her hand over the soft wool dress. Just think, Papa had picked it out just for her. It wasn't the dress's fault that she had to go away. But nothing was settled, not yet.

Penny gathered up the box and climbed the stairs. She hung the dress on the outside of the wardrobe so that she could see it from her bed.

Light streamed up over the horizon. If she strained she could look out the window and see the sun rising over the Eastern Passage. There was mist in the harbour but that would soon fade away. It would be a beautiful day. Penny covered Maggie's fat feet with the blanket and, slipping off her robe and slippers, crawled back into bed. She put her arm around Emily and pulled the sleeping child in close. Her little body was warm and comforting.

"I love you, Emily. I don't want to leave you. I don't want to leave this house."

Sleep came unbidden.