



The Hundred Dresses Part 2



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WHILE the class was circling the room, the monitor from the principal's office brought Miss Mason a note. Miss Mason read it several times and studied it thoughtfully for a while. Then she clapped her hands.

“Attention, class. Everyone back to their seat.”

When the shuffling of feet had stopped and the room was still and quiet, Miss Mason said, “I have a letter from Wanda's father that I want to read to you.”

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Miss Mason stood there a moment and the silence in the room grew tense and expectant. The teacher adjusted her glasses slowly and deliberately. Her manner indicated that what was coming — this letter from Wanda's father — was a matter of great importance. Everybody listened closely as Miss Mason read the brief note.

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Dear Teacher:

My Wanda will not come to your school any more. Jake also. Now we move away to big city. No more holler 'Pollack'. No more ask why funny name. Plenty of funny names in the big city.

Yours truly,

Jan Petronski

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A deep silence met the reading of this letter. Miss Mason took off her glasses, blew on them and wiped them on her soft white handkerchief. Then she put them on again and looked at the class. When she spoke her voice was very low.

“I am sure that none of the boys and girls in Room Thirteen would purposely and deliberately hurt anyone’s feelings because his or her name happened to be a long, unfamiliar one. I prefer to think that what was said was said in thoughtlessness. I know that all of you feel the way I do, that this is a very unfortunate thing to have happened — unfortunate and sad, both. And I want you all to think about it.”

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The first period was a study period. Maddie tried to prepare her lessons, but she could not put her mind on her work. She had a very sick feeling in the bottom of her stomach. True, she had not enjoyed listening to Peggy ask Wanda how many dresses she had in her closet, but she had said nothing. She had stood by silently, and that was just as bad as what Peggy had done. Worse. She was a coward. At least Peggy hadn't considered they were being mean but she, Maddie, had thought they were doing wrong. She could put herself in Wanda's shoes.

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Goodness! Wasn't there anything she could do? If only she could tell Wanda she hadn't meant to hurt her feelings. She turned around and stole a glance at Peggy, but Peggy did not look up. She seemed to be studying hard. Well, whether Peggy felt badly or not, she, Maddie, had to do something. She had to find Wanda Petronski. Maybe she had not yet moved away. Maybe Peggy would climb the Heights with her, and they would tell Wanda she had won the contest, that they thought she was smart and the hundred dresses were beautiful.

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When school was dismissed in the afternoon, Peggy said, with pretended casualness, “Hey, let’s go and see if that kid has left town or not.”

So Peggy had had the same idea! Maddie glowed. Peg was really all right.

The two girls hurried out of the building, up the street toward Boggins Heights, the part of town that wore such a forbidding air on this kind of a November afternoon, drizzly, damp and dismal.

“Well, at least,” said Peggy gruffly, “I never did call her a foreigner or make fun of her name. I never thought she had the sense to know we were making fun of her anyway. I thought she was too dumb. And gee, look how she can draw!”

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Maddie could say nothing. All she hoped was that they would find Wanda. She wanted to tell her that they were sorry they had picked on her, and how wonderful the whole school thought she was, and please, not to move away and everybody would be nice. She and Peggy would fight anybody who was not nice. The two girls hurried on. They hoped to get to the top of the hill before dark.

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“I think that’s where the Petronskis live,” said Maddie, pointing to a little white house. Wisps of old grass stuck up here and there along the pathway like thin kittens. The house and its sparse little yard looked shabby but clean. It reminded Maddie of Wanda’s one dress, her faded blue cotton dress, shabby but clean.

There was not a sign of life about the house. Peggy knocked firmly on the door, but there was no answer. She and Maddie went around to the back yard and knocked there. Still there was no answer.

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There was no doubt about it. The Petronskis were gone. How could they ever make amends?

They turned slowly and made their way back down the hill.

“Well, anyway,” said Peggy, “she’s gone now, so what can we do? Besides, when I was asking her about all her dresses, she probably was getting good ideas for her drawings. She might not even have won the contest, otherwise.”

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Maddie turned this idea carefully over in her head, for if there were anything in it she would not have to feel so badly. But that night she could not get to sleep. She thought about Wanda and her faded blue dress and the little house she had lived in. And she thought of the glowing picture those hundred dresses made — all lined up in the classroom. At last Maddie sat up in bed and pressed her forehead tight in her hands and really thought. This was the hardest thinking she had ever done. After a long, long time, she reached an important conclusion. She was never going to stand by and say nothing again.

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If she ever heard anybody picking on someone because they were funny looking or because they had strange names, she'd speak up. Even if it meant losing Peggy's friendship. She had no way of making things right with Wanda, but from now on she would never make anybody else that unhappy again.

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On Saturday Maddie spent the afternoon with Peggy. They were writing a letter to Wanda Petronski. It was just a friendly letter telling about the contest and telling Wanda she had won. They told her how pretty her drawings were. And they asked her if she liked where she was living and if she liked her new teacher. They had meant to say they were sorry, but it ended up with their just writing a friendly letter, the kind they would have written to any good friend, and they signed it with lots of X's for love. They mailed the letter to Boggins Heights, writing 'Please Forward' on the envelope.

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Days passed and there was no answer, but the letter did not come back, so maybe Wanda had received it. Perhaps she was so hurt and angry she was not going to answer. You could not blame her.

Weeks went by and still Wanda did not answer. Peggy had begun to forget the whole business, and Maddie put herself to sleep at night making speeches about Wanda, defending her from great crowds of girls who were trying to tease her with, “How many dresses have you got?” And before Wanda could press her lips together in a tight line, the way she did before answering, Maddie would cry out, “Stop!” Then everybody would feel ashamed the way she used to feel.

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Now it was Christmas time and there was snow on the ground. Christmas bells and a small tree decorated the classroom. On the last day of school before the holidays, the teacher showed the class a letter she had received that morning.

“You remember Wanda Petronski, the gifted little artist who won the drawing contest? Well, she has written me, and I am glad to know where she lives, because now I can send her medal. I want to read her letter to you.” The class sat up with a sudden interest and listened intently.

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Dear Miss Mason,

How are you and Room Thirteen? Please tell the girls they can keep those hundred dresses, because in my new house I have a hundred new ones, all lined up in my closet. I'd like that girl Peggy to have the drawing of the green dress with the red trimming, and her friend Maddie to have the blue one. For Christmas, I miss that school and my new teacher does not equalise with you. Merry Christmas to you and everybody.

**Yours truly,
Wanda Petronski**

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On the way home from school Maddie and Peggy held their drawings very carefully. All the houses had wreaths and holly in the windows. Outside the grocery store, hundreds of Christmas trees were stacked, and in the window, candy peppermint sticks and cornucopias of shiny transparent paper were strung. The air smelled like Christmas and light shining everywhere reflected different colours on the snow.

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“Boy!” said Peggy, “this shows she really likes us. It shows she got our letter and this is her way of saying that everything’s all right. And that’s that.”

“I hope so,” said Maddie sadly. She felt sad because she knew she would never see the little tight-lipped Polish girl again and couldn’t ever really make things right between them.

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She went home and she pinned her drawing over a torn place in the pink-flowered wallpaper in the bedroom. The shabby room came alive from the brilliancy of the colours. Maddie sat down on her bed and looked at the drawing. She had stood by and said nothing, but Wanda had been nice to her, anyway.

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Tears blurred her eyes and she gazed for a long time at the picture. Then hastily she rubbed her eyes and studied it intently. The colours in the dress were so vivid that she had scarcely noticed the face and head of the drawing. But it looked like her, Maddie! It really looked like her own mouth. Why it really looked like her own self! Wanda had really drawn this for her. Excitedly, she ran over to Peggy's.

“Peg!” she said, “let me see your picture.”

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“What’s the matter?” asked Peggy, as they clattered up to her room where Wanda’s drawing was lying face down on the bed. Maddie carefully raised it.

“Look! She drew you. That’s you!” she exclaimed. And the head and face of this picture did look like Peggy.

“What did I say!” said Peggy, “She must have really liked us, anyway.”

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“Yes, she must have,” agreed Maddie, and she blinked away the tears that came every time she thought of Wanda standing alone in that sunny spot in the school yard, looking stolidly over at the group of laughing girls after she had walked off, after she had said, “Sure, a hundred of them, all lined up.



**THANK
YOU**
