

Lucie, Me, and the Camellia Tree

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18th March 1893 10am

I check my grid. Again. I'm supposed to do Mt Victoria... and Kent Terrace and Cambridge Terrace. Something tells me I might have signed up for a bit too much, but Mama always says that you have to make sacrifices for what you believe in - and if I have to sacrifice my shoes for suffrage, it will all be worth it.

Pushing open a well-oiled gate, I make my way up a chequered stone path to a grand villa. I knock on an imposing red door and wait for an answer. The door opens; a young lady peers out.

"Mrs Holmes is not at home. May I pass on a message?"

"Actually, I was wondering if she would sign the suffrage petition."

"I'm not sure, Miss."

"Would you sign it?"

"Me? I'm just a maid."

"That's fine. Here—" I pass her the sheet.

She pulls a pencil from her pocket and writes her name in wavery script: Martha Wells, Austin Street.

I thank her and make my way back down the path.

A chilly breeze curls around my ankles and I shiver.

"Hey! Cybill!" My older brother Thomas is leaning against the front door of our house. "Are you really still doing that?"

“Yes I am, Thomas. Because, unlike you, I can commit to something.”

“Hey! I do commit to things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I – um - the...”

I groan and carry on walking.

After a few minutes I reach a villa that’s seen better days. The paint on the door is peeling and a small smeared brass letter plate flaps in the wind. I knock on the door. A floorboard creaks and the letter plate snaps open.

“Who are you?” says the letterbox in an impatient female voice.

I jump, and bend down to see a pair of grey eyes peering at me suspiciously. “I’m Cybill, madam. Cybill Jones.”

“What do you want?” The eyes narrow.

“I am a representative of the Women’s Franchise. I am here to ask you to sign our petition to give females over the age of 21 the right to vote.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said no. I am not signing your petition.” She spits out the last word like it’s made of poison.

“But madam –”

“No. Young girls like you should be learning sewing and cooking - along with some manners. Not pounding the pavement for lost causes. Goodbye.”

The letter box snaps shut like the mouth of an angry dragon, just a few inches from my nose. Retreating to the pavement, I check my grid and my hand shakes as I tick off the houses I have visited.

“Ooof!” Something knocks my arm and my papers go flying.

“I’m so sorry!” A woman, probably only a few years older than me, is scrambling to pick them up.

“No, it’s my fault, I wasn’t looking.”

The woman smiles and we manage to gather everything. As she’s passing the last sheet to me she stops.

“You - you work for the Women’s Franchise thing don’t you?”

I nod.

“Can I sign?”

I grin, “Of course.”

I follow her to a house on Kent Terrace. Her garden is overgrown with thorny weeds. The only part of it that doesn’t look run down is a white camellia bush. She shoves open a peeling door.

“Wait there.” After a few moments she runs back carrying an orange crayon. “Sorry. This is all I could find.”

I pass her the sheet. Then I hear a thump. A back door slams open and a man walks into the hall.

“Is it that stupid petition?” his voice is quietly menacing. The lady freezes. “Don’t sign it.” He stares at her, and me for what feels like years, but is only a few seconds in reality. Then he turns away and stomps up the stairs.

The woman grips the crayon tighter in her hand. She takes the sheet from me and rests it on her knee.

She signs it in a wobbly script: Lucie King.

“Lucie. That’s a lovely name.”

Lucie smiles.

A sudden gust of wind blows a creamy white camellia petal onto my grid. I grab it between my fingers and slip it into my coat pocket.

28th July 1893 5pm

“Lucie!” I knock softly on the door.

“I’m coming.” I hear a small bump and then Lucie appears, pulling the door shut behind her. Her brown hair is tied in a bun and she has wrapped a purple and green scarf around her neck. My neck is freezing and I feel stupid for not thinking of a scarf. We walk down the path to the nearest tram stop and wait.

Lucie is nervously playing with her hands and I feel all squiggly inside. I hear a neigh and the tram arrives. The horses that pull it are breathing heavily, their breath misting in the cold air. I step on and fumble for my purse, taking out the coins for two tickets. The conductor nods as he takes my money, snips a hole into each ticket and passes one to Lucie and one to me. We sit down on the nearest bench. Lucie’s cheeks are pink and her nose is crimson.

“Cold,” she whispers.

“Well, at least you have a scarf! My neck is freezing!”

Lucie laughs.

We sit in nervous silence for the rest of the journey, then we get off on Lambton Quay and walk to Parliament, the new electric lamps lighting our way.

A queue of women has already started to form and we line up behind two ladies who are arm in arm and whispering to each other. “I brought my embroidery with me. It can get so dull in the ladies’ gallery,” the lady who is speaking yawns. “Last time it went on for so long I finished a whole sampler and made Georgie a scarf.”

The queue starts to move and we soon arrive at a set of double doors. A man is standing in front of them and looks Lucie and me up and down with a superior air. I look him straight in the eye – and wink. He flinches. A narrow hallway smells of pipe smoke, gas and shoe polish. Then up some creaking wooden stairs to the ladies' gallery which, unlike the hallway, smells of dust and the lingering scent of rose perfume. I walk towards the front row, but an old lady dressed in silks sniffs and gives me a cold stare so I retreat hastily to the back row.

The lady next to us is knitting and pays no attention to us.

“Cybill.” Lucie’s voice is hushed.

“Yes?”

“I’m nervous. What if it doesn’t pass? What if I have to live my whole life without being able to have a say about who runs my country? What if we never get a chance?”

The dim electric lights cast shadows over her face as I try to think of my answer. “The truth is, I don’t know, but we mustn’t forget how many people want this to happen. When I went asking for signatures, the first day I met you, almost everyone signed. We won’t give up. I promise.” Lucie nods at me and smiles.

Eventually, a silence descends. Even the lady next to us stops knitting.

Sir John Hall starts speaking. I recognise him from the paper. His silvery beard catches the lamp light and draws attention to his face. “It is my great honour to present to you tonight a number of petitions from women of the age of twenty-one years and upwards in favour of the extension of the franchise to women, and of their being allowed to vote at the next election. I might say that this is the most numerous signed petition that has ever been presented to this House, or in any of the Australian Colonies.”

Then he puts down a vast roll of paper - wrapped around what looked like a broom handle - and gives it a push, like a wheelwright testing a wheel. It unfurls as it rolls along the length of the chamber. We all gasp as it hits the opposite wall with a resounding thud. Lucie and I look at each other in awe. Then I notice something. "Lucie, look!" I point at a piece of the petition. "That looks like orange crayon to me!"

The streets are dark as we make our way home along the waterfront. The tram doesn't run this late. We don't mind: Lucy and I are running and laughing the whole way. I'm still in a happy mood when we reach Lucie's house, even though my lungs are burning. On the path Lucie's stocking snags on the white camellia bush. "That silly tree! It is Henry's pride and joy, but I do wish I could just get rid of it." "No! Don't do that," I say as the blooms shine like lanterns in the moonlight. "It's just given me an idea..."