

Jessica and the Neighborhood
by
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"Jessica!"

"Yes, Nana? Oh, it gets more beautiful every day. I'm so glad you're teaching me to sew. Do you think I can learn to be a seamstress just like you?"

"Yes. I am so happy teaching you, but I called you in for another reason. The woman who is going to wear this dress is marrying a soldier. Right after the wedding, they are going to Germany where he will report for duty. On the phone just now, she told me he will be shipped out a week early, and so I must finish this dress by tomorrow. And here are your parents arriving this evening, and we have nothing in the house for dinner. Would you do the errands for us?"

Nana's request surprised Jessica. After all, she was only visiting. She lived in a white house surrounded by grass, trees, birds, and squirrels. In a suburb, almost the country. Yes, she had enjoyed visiting Nana in the city, but she had never gone anywhere without Nana.

"Now, not to worry," Nana said. "You've been here for a month. We've done the errands every day. Ah, I wish you could stay forever! Why, of course you can do it; you're my granddaughter!"

"I...oh....yes, I'm sure I can do!"

"Good for you. The list is on the phone table and my purse is in that drawer. You know that my shopping sack is hanging behind my apron on the kitchen door. Good! Good-bye, Jessica."

"Good-bye, Nana."



"Here I am on my own! Skippin', hoppin', jumpin' off, out, on my own!"

"Stop right there you noisy girl! Explain what you mean by hopping, skipping, jumping and singing down my steps without so much as a polite 'Hello' or a 'Mrs. Godwin, how are you today?'"

"Mrs. Godwin, hello! I'm sorry. How are you, today? I was too excited."

"Where's your grandmother?"

"Up in the apartment. She has to finish a beautiful wedding dress right away. The bride is marrying a handsome soldier who is leaving for Germany, a week early."

"I married Mr. Godwin two days before he was shipped out, February 2, 1942. Four years he was gone, but he came back, thank God, healthy and whole, skinny like a rail, but back. Getting some meat on him didn't take long."

"Where did he go, Mrs. Godwin?"

"Why, child, to fight Hitler and the Nazis. And beat'em we did, too. Still, so many died, so many others lost, and so many came back broken. Still, all that was long ago. Why Godwin's been gone longer than he was away at that war."

"Where did he go this time?"

"Why, child, I mean he died, October 12, 1982. Now, child, you be careful. Pay attention to the 'walk-don't walk' signs. Watch for cars coming around the corner. And don't cross in the middle of the street."

"Thank you, Mrs. Godwin. Bye, Mrs. Godwin."

"Keep your wits about you, child. You're in the city now! Get me a small loaf with seeds, thank you."

"Glad to. Back before you know it!"

"Oh, on my own, skippin', hoppin', jumpin', singin' off on my own!"

"Brrriiinnk!"

The baker's bell over the door made Jessica jump.

"Hello, Jessica. Your grandmother's not ill, I hope?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Dapolito, she's fine. She has to finish a wedding dress, so I'm doing the errands on my own. My parents are coming tonight."

"Good for you. And I don't mind telling you that seeing you coming in here all on your own makes me feel like it was only yesterday that your mother ran in here, first time all on her own, laughing, calling out, 'Mr. Dapolito, we need some bread, please!' You could have knocked me over with a feather. When she was a baby, learning to talk, your mother couldn't say Dapolito, so she called me Mr. Apple-O, and then she just sort of kept it up. And now here she was all on her own and calling out, 'Hello, Mr. Dapolito!' clear as a bell. I ran to the back, got a red apple, and handed it to her, 'For Lucy, my best customer, from Mr. Apple-O.' And now her daughter! What can I get for you today?"

"A large loaf with seeds, please," and then Jessica read from her list, "pepper sticks, and a bag of bread crumbs. Oh, and for Mrs. Godwin a small loaf with seeds. Did you know Mr. Godwin fought in a war?"

"Yes, with my father. Brave men. Sam Godwin came back. Many others didn't. I was in high school. One day, when I came out, there was Mama, crying, 'Joey, Joey, a telegram, the government, your father, Missing, Presumed Dead.' Mama was already running the bakery, and that day she began to teach me. And even after I was grown and married and the bakery doing fine, I still hoped, one day, that bell would ring, and there he'd be, my father, back from the war."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, no, Jessica. Many of my customers, we've known our stories all our lives, so we don't ask. Telling hurts; still it keeps memory alive. Thank you. \$2.70, please. Do you need a bag?"

"No, I've got Nana's right here."

"Say hello to your grandmother and your mother for me."

"I will. Thank you. Good-bye Mr. D...Mr. Apple-O!"

Jessica's next stop was usually her favorite, Mrs. Lee's greengrocery. Yes, the supermarket at home had most of the same fruits and vegetables, but in Mrs. Lee's she could smell, even touch, the smooth slide of a celery stalk, the woolly fur of a kiwi, the midnight roundness of a plum. But today she was on her own and Mrs. Lee spoke English very poorly and Jessica knew no Korean. What if they got the order mixed up?

"So, hello Jessica, grandmother not ill?"

"No, Mrs. Lee. She's finishing a wedding dress so that they can get married before the soldier is shipped out. What does 'shipped out' mean?"

"So beautiful work grandmother sew! And granddaughter help. 'Shipped out' mean, man, woman, child on truck, boat, like vegetable, and.... away. List please."

"Oh....were you ever shipped out, Mrs. Lee?"

"Korea, father shipped out war, mother shipped out country, Mrs. Lee inside, mother no tell, fear. After war, father dead, family shipped out....U.S. of A., grandmother, grandfather, aunt, mother, and Mrs. Lee, one cabin, metal ship. So leaks."

"The ship leaked!"

"No," Mrs. Lee said holding up what looked like a giant scallion, "L-E-E-K, vegetable, grandmother make soup? L-E-A-K, drip, drip pipe. No ship leak."

"Excuse me, could I get some help over here?"

"Yes, right with you, sir, so, also, carrot, red leaf lettuce, garlic, short list, \$3.43."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Lee." Jessica handed her four dollars. "Mrs. Lee, I was afraid we might get things mixed up. You speak English so well."

"So welcome, Jessica. No, Jessica listen wiser ear. So, sir?"

Jessica turned down Thompson Street. She loved everything about this street except the old men who sat outside Tony's Barbershop.

"Hello Mr. Victor, Mr. Napoli, Mr. Pierre, Mr. Levy, Hello Mr. Sinelli, Mr. D'Amato, Mr. Reeberg," and then Jessica turned to the oldest man with a huge mustache, who was, amazingly, Nana's uncle, "Hello Uncle Joseph."

"Hello Jessica," they said, Uncle Joseph taking her between his legs, holding her, kissing her, and saying, "First time Mary sent your grandmother out on her own, she fell down and broke six eggs! Now you be careful! Tell that mother of yours to come see me. No time, I'm kissing your little baby."

"Oh no, I'm not getting married. I'm going to be a fashion model," Jessica said, mostly to have something to say. The men chuckled and nodded; several patted her.

"Excuse me, Uncle Joseph, but I need to get the coffee," Jessica said, wiggling free.

She ran down the street, up the steps to Sinelli's Coffee Shop, and pushed hard on the screen door. It flew open, crashed into a bag of coffee beans and knocked the bag over, sending beans skating all over the floor. Normally, the shining copper espresso machine and the smell of freshly ground beans and brewed coffee made Jessica's mouth water. Today she felt like crying.

"Oh, Mrs. Sinelli, I'm so sorry!"

"Hello, Jessica."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Mrs. Sinelli. I was rushing, helping Nana with the shopping and...."

"Now, now, no damage done. Here's the broom. We'll have this cleaned up in no time. And while we do, Mr. Sinelli will make up Mrs. Brown's usual order."

"In addition, because my parents are coming tonight, we need," Jessica said, looking at her list, "half a pound of decaffeinated French Roast."

"That will be \$5.69," Mr. Sinelli said. "We hope you will be a regular, just a bit more slowly next time."

"Yes, please, visit us any time," Mrs. Sinelli said. "Now, half of these are for you, for now, and half for your mother. How she loved chocolate coffee beans! We went to school together. Will she stay for a visit?"

"No, school starts next week, so we're going back tonight."

"Now, you tell her that we miss her here."

"I will. I'm sorry. Thank you."

Chocolate coffee beans thrilling her mouth, Jessica stood before Max's where beautiful shoes dangled from silver webs, hid behind green gourds, and floated upon lilly pads. Each time they had done the errands, Jessica had begged, "Nana, let's go in and look!"

"No dear," she had said, "Max's shoes are far too expensive for us."

Jessica pulled open the door and stepped into Max's.

"Yes, Miss? How may I help you?"

"How much are the shoes in the window? The ones with the purple jewels."

"Yes, Miss, the amethyst pumps, excellent taste, if I may say so, three hundred and fifty dollars, unfortunately, we do not make them in your size, Miss."

"Thank you. You make the most beautiful shoes!"

"Yes, er, no Miss, Mr. Max lives in Milan, my name is Jeffrey."

Jessica blushed.

"Ah, no Miss! When I next speak with Mr. Max, he will be so happy to hear your kind opinion."

"Pleased to meet you, Jeffery," Jessica said.

Jessica walked out of Max's and down the street as if she were already a fashion model wearing amethyst pumps on a Parisian runway.

"Bark, Baaarkkkk, Brarrrk!"

Jessica jumped at Gigi's greeting. Gigi, a perfectly groomed toy poodle, knew herself to be a tough city dog, ready for action, not for fashion; she hated the pink hair bow that Mrs. Cohen tied and retied. Gigi hated fashion! Had Gigi guessed that Jessica had been dreaming of being a fashion model?

"Ah, Jessica, hello, your grandmother has some last minute work; your mother is coming in tonight; and you are doing the errands. Your bag is quite full. It must be heavy. Come, sit, rest, talk."

"Hello, Mrs. Cohen."

"Ah, my dear, you would not believe...", and Mrs. Cohen was off leaving Jessica free to quietly take out Gigi's bow and then relax into the slap of handballs, the squeak of swings, the snore of an old man three benches over, people and cars passing, lights changing, "red yellow green, walk, don't walk, walk."

A beautiful gingko shaded her. At home, of all the trees in her yard, Jessica called only one, "my tree." It was a gingko. And so, Jessica had no trouble picturing this tree changed in two months to a proud warrior brandishing bright yellow shields, then in winter, a stark sculpture in silver and white, and in spring, an elegant lady covered in fans and necklaces, all bright green.

"Yip, YipYip!"

She was wide awake. Gigi sat beside her, on alert. A frowning fashion model walked right at them. She wore a severe black suit and very high heels that went "Click, clickclick, Click."

"Yap, Yap, YapYapYap, Yap," Gigi shouted, jumping out at her.

"Clickity, clickity, click-click, click" went the heels as the fashion model rushed away, up the street.

Gigi licked Jessica's hand; Jessica rubbed Gigi behind her ears.

"Oh, Mrs. Cohen, I've got to finish the shopping or we won't have time to make dinner before my parents get here!"

"Ah, until tomorrow, then. Bring your mother for a chat."

"Bark, Brarrrk!"

"Hello, Mrs. Cohen. Hello, Jessica."

"Mama!"

"How full your bag is. Well done!"

"Ah, hello, Lucy. We've enjoyed getting to know your daughter. Come, sit, chat."

"Thank you, Mrs. Cohen. We should finish the errands. Tomorrow for that chat?"

"Welcome home, Lucy."

"Bark!"

"Where's Daddy?"

"We changed our plans. Daddy decided to stay home and work, and I've taken off four days so that I can spend them with Mother and you, here."

"Ah, Mama. Great! How did Mrs. Cohen know?"

"When I was a girl, she seemed to know everything."

"Everybody misses you. Come on, we better finish the errands."

They rushed into Harriett's for orange and pink zinnias, into M. Pierre's for white sausage, and into J&J Market for eggs, milk, and flour. Now Lucy's sack was as heavy as Jessica's, and they were happy to turn to home.

"Oh, Mother, what's that truck doing here in the middle of the sidewalk?" demanded Jessica.

"Somebody moving. Now take my hand. Sixth Avenue is very busy this time of day."

"Oh, why do people move?"

"Their lives change. One day you'll be moving, off to college, work, marriage."

"Are you shipping me out?"

"No, not unless you join the military. Why?"

"Did you or Daddy fight in a war?"

"No. Three of my high school friends died in the Vietnam War, and one was listed as missing in action."

"The same thing happened to Mr. Dapolito's father. He told me you called him Mr. Apple-O."

"I had forgotten. Tomorrow, shall we do the errands together?"

"Sure! That'd be great."

"Hi, Mrs. Godwin, I'm back. Here's my mother!"

"Yes, she said, 'Hello, Mrs. Godwin,' most politely when she arrived."

"Mrs. Godwin, I'll leave your loaf by your door. Thank you for telling me about Mr. Godwin."

"You're welcome, child. Thank you for the bread."

"We're back, Nana!"

"Yes, Mother, we're back!"

"Oh, welcome home, dear ones."

"Come on, Mother; Nana's busy and we're all hungry. Let's make dinner!"