

Maryellen

1954

Taking
Off



Bridesmaids, Birthdays, and Brainstorms

* Chapter 1 *



In three weeks, I'll be ten!" Maryellen Larkin exclaimed happily. Maryellen and her friends were walking home from school on a sunny April afternoon. Maryellen said, "I've been waiting to be ten my *whole life*."

"Me, too," said her friends Karen Stohlman, Karen King, and Angela Terlizzi.

"What kind of birthday party are you going to have, Ellie?" asked Karen King, getting down to serious business. "Bowling?"

"No, I did that last year," said Maryellen. "This year I want to do something new—something that no one's ever done before."

"How about a Davy Crockett party?" suggested Karen Stohlman.

Davy Crockett was everyone's favorite TV show. It was about an American hero, Davy Crockett, who lived in the mountains of Tennessee in the eighteen hundreds. All the kids had hats with long fur tails like the one Davy Crockett wore. Maryellen even had "Daisy Crockett" underwear!

"We could sing the TV show theme song," said Karen

Stohlman. She sang: "*Davy, Davy Crockett, king of the wild frontier!*"

"No," said Angela. "We'll sing, '*Ellie, Ellie Larkin, queen of Daytona Beach!*'"

This struck all four girls as hilarious. They laughed until Karen King asked, "Speaking of Davy, will you invite Davy Fenstermacher to your party this year? You have every other year."

"That was back when we were friends," said Maryellen.

Davy Fenstermacher lived next door to the Larkins. He and Maryellen used to be best friends. They'd ride their bikes to school together, eat lunch together, and play together after school and on weekends. But they'd had a falling-out back at the beginning of the school year, and their friendship still was not repaired. Davy never even spoke to Maryellen anymore.

"Davy wouldn't come to my party if I asked him, now," she said. "He's too busy being best friends with Wayne."

"Wayne the Pain," said Karen Stohlman.

Maryellen said briskly, "Ten is too old to have boys at your birthday party anyway. You don't have boys again until you're teenagers in high school, and the boys are your boyfriends, and you play records and dance, sort of like a sock hop only at your house."

All the girls knew that a sock hop was a dance where you took off your shoes and danced in your socks so

that you wouldn't scuff up the floor. They were trying to imagine even *wanting* to do such a thing as dance with a boy, especially one like Wayne, who, they felt certain, would only be *more* Wayne-ish and pain-ish in high school than he was now.

"Joan told me about high school parties," Maryellen added. "That's how I know."

"Ah!" said the girls. They were in awe of Joan, Maryellen's eldest sister. They respected Joan as their highest authority on fashion, romance, and being grown-up. After all, Joan was engaged to her boyfriend, Jerry, who had been a sailor in the Korean War and was now in college. Joan and Jerry were already planning their wedding, which was to take place at the end of the summer. Maryellen was thrilled, because she was going to be a bridesmaid.

Suddenly, she gasped. "I've just had a brainstorm. What if I have a movie-star birthday party and everyone comes dressed as her favorite movie star? I could be Debbie Reynolds and wear my bridesmaid dress."

"A movie-star party!" said Karen Stohlman. "I love that idea!"

The girls started naming all the most glamorous movie stars of 1955.

"I'll be Audrey Hepburn," said Angela.

"Dibs on Grace Kelly," said Karen Stohlman.

"I can't decide if I want to be Elizabeth Taylor or

Marilyn Monroe,” sighed Karen King. “Or maybe I’ll be a television star like Lucille Ball from *I Love Lucy*.”

“Maybe I’ll be J. Fred Muggs, the chimpanzee!” joked Maryellen. She loped along the sidewalk, swinging her arms as if she were the famous television chimp. “And Scooter could come as Rin Tin Tin or Lassie,” she added.

The girls giggled. Scooter was a very nice dog, but far too stout and lazy to be heroic like the dogs on television.



“Oh!” said Maryellen, bouncing on her toes, “now I’m even *more* excited about my birthday!”

“Me, too,” said Karen Stohlman. “I bet your bridesmaid dress is gorgeous.”

“W-e-l-l,” said Maryellen. “It *will* be, when it’s finished. Mom’s making it.”

“Oh,” said the girls.

Maryellen knew what they were thinking. They’d all had experiences with their mothers making dresses as part of do-it-yourself crazes. Her friends were too polite to say it, but Maryellen knew they were thinking that dresses made by mothers didn’t always turn out very well.

Angela was the first to think of something optimistic to say. “Since your mom is making it, your dress will fit you perfectly.”

“I hope so,” joked Maryellen. “Or instead of Debbie

Reynolds, the movie star I’ll look like will be the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*.”

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“Ellie, honey,” sighed Mrs. Larkin. “Stand still.”

Maryellen held her breath. She was standing on a chair while Mom pinned the tissue-paper dress pattern onto her. Mom frowned in concentration, and even Maryellen’s energetic imagination had to strain to imagine how a dress would emerge from the tissue-paper pattern. Maryellen hadn’t told Mom yet that she was counting on wearing her dress to her movie-star birthday party in a few weeks. Adding the pressure of a deadline would put Mom right over the top with nervousness, she could tell.

Mrs. Larkin sighed again, sounding harassed. Joan, the bride-to-be, looked up from her book and said gently, “Mom? You don’t have to do this, you know. I’d be just as happy with ready-made bridesmaid dresses bought off the rack from O’Neal’s.”

“No, no, no,” said Mrs. Larkin. She sat back on her heels and dabbed her sweaty forehead with the back of her wrist. “No, I’m determined to make the dresses. Your dad and I were married during the Depression, and so I didn’t have any bridesmaids at my wedding, and I was married in a suit—a borrowed suit at that! I want to do for you everything that I missed out on, Joanie.”

“Jerry and I don’t need a big fuss,” said Joan. “Just a

small wedding is fine with us.”

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Larkin. “A girl’s wedding day is the most important day in her life! Your father and I want yours to be perfect in every detail: your cake, your flowers, your veil . . .”

Maryellen piped up, “Your hair, your shoes . . .”

“Jerry and I have talked about getting married outdoors, in a garden or a park,” said Joan. “So I’ll probably wear flats. We don’t want to be all stiff and uncomfortable.”

“But I was hoping Jerry would wear his dress whites Navy uniform!” said Mom.

“That’s so formal,” said Joan. “We want our wedding to be relaxed.”

“Joan!” said Mom. “Flats? A park? This is your wedding, not a wienie roast. Honestly, sometimes I think I’m more excited about your marriage than you are.” Mom took a pin and—*jab!*—used it to pin the paper pattern for the collar onto Maryellen’s shoulder.

Maryellen suspected that the collar was backward. But she stayed quiet while Joan said, “No, I’m excited about the *marriage*. I’m thrilled to be marrying Jerry. But to me, marriage is one thing and the wedding is another. The marriage is forever and the wedding is only one day. Jerry and I want our wedding to be beautiful, just not stuffy and fussy.”

“It’s not stuffy or fussy to do things correctly,” said

Mom. “I am determined that you and Jerry will have a proper wedding. For heaven’s sake, you’re such a book-worm that if I left it up to you, you’d probably get married on the steps of the public library.”

“And carry books for a bouquet,” joked Maryellen.

“Well, I do love books *almost* as much as I love Jerry,” Joan said, smiling. “But I promise I won’t get married at the library.”

Maryellen laughed. She was glad to see Mom laugh as well—even though laughing distracted her so that she pinned the paper pattern for the sash on backward, too.

* * *

The next day at school, Maryellen’s fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Humphrey, wrote on the blackboard:

Today is Tuesday, April 12, 1955.

“Wayne Philpott,” said Mrs. Humphrey without turning around, “if you shoot that rubber band at Maryellen, you and I will be having lunch together the rest of the week.”

Davy snatched the rubber band away from Wayne and put it in his desk, and Maryellen crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue at Wayne over her shoulder. Sometimes she was glad that Mrs. Humphrey seemed to have eyes in the back of her head!

“Boys and girls,” said Mrs. Humphrey, facing the class.

“Today we’re going to go to a special assembly for the whole school in the auditorium. Line up, please.”

As Maryellen and her classmates filed into the auditorium, she saw the principal, Mr. Carey, up front fiddling with the dials and rabbit-ears antenna on the TV set to get a clear picture. It seemed to be a news program. When all the students were seated, Mr. Carey turned up the volume very loud. The screen was too little and too far away for Maryellen and the other students to see, but they could hear.

“Ten years ago today, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt died,” said the TV newscaster. “Roosevelt could not walk, because he had had polio, a terrible disease that has killed many people, especially children. Three years ago, in 1952, a polio epidemic affected over fifty thousand people in the United States, and killed nearly three thousand.

“But today, Dr. Jonas Salk, at the University of Pittsburgh, announced that he has found a safe and effective vaccine to prevent polio. The whole world is grateful to Dr. Salk, and to the more than one hundred million Americans who contributed money to research for polio prevention. And now, the task before us is to raise public awareness and to raise money to produce and distribute the vaccine.”

The TV newscaster went on, but no one heard the rest of the announcement, because the auditorium exploded with cheers. The students and teachers clapped and whistled. A way to prevent polio was very good news indeed.

Maryellen felt someone poke her in the back. It was Davy. He grinned and raised his eyebrows. Then he turned away without saying anything. But Maryellen knew that Davy’s grin was a silent, split-second celebration between the two of them. Davy was letting her know that he realized how the news about the polio vaccine meant even more to her than it did to most people, because when Maryellen was younger, she had had polio. She was all better now. Really, the only reminder was that one leg was a tiny bit weaker than the other, and her lungs were extra sensitive to cold.

But Maryellen remembered very well how much polio had hurt. Sometimes in her dreams she had polio again, and the heavy, dark, frightened feeling of being lost in pain and worry came back. With all her heart, she was glad that now, thanks to Dr. Salk, no one else would ever have to know that terrible feeling. And she was glad that even though Davy didn’t seem to want to be her friend anymore, he understood how she felt.

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