

Maryellen

1954

The One and Only



The Room Switcheroo

* Chapter 1 *



Maryellen Larkin liked to make up episodes of her favorite TV shows and imagine herself in them.

This morning, for example, Maryellen was walking down the hot, sunny sidewalk with her dog, Scooter. Really, she was mailing a letter to her grandparents. But she was *pretending* that she was in an episode of the exciting Western *The Lone Ranger*. Her only companion was her trusty horse, Thunderbolt. (That was Scooter's part.) Maryellen leaned forward as if she were battling her way through a blinding blizzard. If she didn't deliver the medicine she was carrying, hundreds of people would die.

Maryellen never gave herself superpowers in any of her imagined shows. She didn't fly or do magic. The difference was that in her TV shows, everyone listened to her great ideas. They followed her advice, and—*ta-da!*—everything turned out just right.

Maryellen put her letter in the mailbox, imagining that she was handing medicine to a kindly old doctor in a snowy town in the Old West.

"Thank you, Miss Larkin, ma'am," the imaginary

doctor said. "We desperately needed this medicine. You have saved hundreds of lives today."

Maryellen smiled modestly and shrugged as if to say, "It was nothing." Then she turned to go. "Come on, Thunderbolt," she said to Scooter. "Our work is done."

Scooter, a stout dachshund, had *just* flopped down and made himself comfortable in the shade of the mailbox. Maryellen whispered, "Come on, Scooter. Get up, old boy." So Scooter rose with a good-natured sigh and waddled behind Maryellen, who pretended to trudge through drifts of snow while grateful townspeople called after her, "Thank you, Miss Larkin! You're our hero!"

"Hey, Ellie," said a real voice, calling her by her nickname. The voice belonged to her friend Davy Fenstermacher, who lived next door in a house that looked exactly like the Larkins' house. Maryellen and Davy had been friends forever.

"Howdy, pardner," Maryellen drawled.

"I'll race you to the swing!" said Davy. "On your mark, get set, go!"

Maryellen and Davy ran to the Larkins' backyard, with Scooter loping along behind them. Maryellen got to the swing first, jumped on, and began to pump. "I win!" she called down to Davy. "You be the Lone Ranger, stuck in quicksand, and I'll jump down and rescue you."

"Okay," said Davy agreeably. Of course, they both knew that cowboys didn't usually jump off swings. But the tree swing in Maryellen's backyard was so much fun that they used it in lots of the TV shows they made up.

Maryellen swung high and then jumped off, landing on the grass with a soft thud. "Come on, Thunderbolt!" she called to Scooter. "We've got to save the Lone Ranger!"

Scooter, already asleep in the shade, snored.

"Better wake him up first, Ellie," said Davy.

But before Maryellen could rouse Scooter, her six-year-old sister, Beverly, came clomping out of the house in an old pair of Mrs. Larkin's high heels. Beverly wore one of Dad's baseball caps turned inside out so that it looked like a crown. Right behind Beverly came Tom and Mikey, Maryellen's younger brothers. They were four and not-quite-two years old.

"What are you doing?" Beverly asked.

"Nothing," said Maryellen, wishing that Beverly and the boys would go back inside, but knowing that they wouldn't. Maryellen, Beverly, Tom, and Mikey shared a bedroom, and even though the little kids were cute and sweet and goofy, they drove Maryellen crazy. Now that it was summer, Beverly, Tom, and Mikey stuck to her like glue.



They couldn't bear to be left out of anything fun that Maryellen might be doing.

Sure enough, Beverly said, "I want to play with you and Davy!"

"Me too!" said Tom.

"Me!" said Mikey.

Davy shot Maryellen a sympathetic look. He had years of experience dealing with Beverly, Tom, and Mikey.

Thinking quickly, Maryellen suggested to Davy, "What if the little kids are in the quicksand, too, and I rescue all of you?"

"Good idea," said Davy.

"Pretend I'm a queen that you're rescuing," said Beverly.

"Oh, brother," Maryellen muttered. That was another problem with Beverly. She liked to pretend, but she always pretended the same thing: that she was a queen. Dad called her Queen Beverly. "I don't think they had queens in the Wild West," Maryellen said. "I've never seen one on a TV show, anyway. Have you, Davy?"

"Nope," said Davy firmly.

Maryellen smiled. Good old Davy always backed her up.

Queen Beverly looked stubborn. Maryellen was just about to give in to Her Majesty when their mother called

out the back door, "Ellie, honey, come in for a minute. I need you."

"Okay," called Maryellen, feeling pleased. Mom needed *her*!

Maryellen's pride wilted just a bit when Mom added, "Beverly, Tom, and Mikey, you come, too." She wished Mom wouldn't always lump her together with Beverly, Tom, and Mikey as if they were one big bumpy creature with four heads, eight arms, and eight legs. Mom certainly treated Maryellen's older sisters, Joan and Carolyn, as separate, serious people.

I'm tired of being one of the "little kids," grumped Maryellen to herself, for the millionth time. *I guess I'm stuck with Beverly, but I'm much too grown-up to share a room with Tom and Mikey. Somehow, I have to convince Mom that I should share a bedroom with Joan and Carolyn so that she'll think of me as one of the "big girls" and take me—and my ideas—more seriously.*

"What do you need us for, Mom?" asked Maryellen.

"Just a quick family meeting," said Mom.

"Oh," said Maryellen without enthusiasm. She knew from experience that it was hard to get a word in edge-wise during family meetings. They were not at all like one of her pretend TV shows where she was the hero and everyone hung on her every word. Maryellen sighed and

said to Davy, "See you later, alligator."

"In a while, crocodile," said Davy. "I'll wait here."

Maryellen walked into the kitchen and slid onto the bench in the breakfast nook next to Joan, her eldest sister. Joan, who was seventeen and therefore nearly all grown-up, looked sideways at Maryellen's grass-stained shorts and inched away, closer to Carolyn. It was crowded on the bench, but Maryellen wanted Mom to see her next to Joan and Carolyn, on their side of the table, so that Mom would think of the three of them as a group.

Maryellen could tell that this family meeting would be like all the others: frustrating. The kitchen was already noisy. Dad had left on a three-day business trip earlier that morning, but Mom and Carolyn, Maryellen's next-oldest sister, were talking a mile a minute. Tom was wailing like a siren as he rode his toy fire truck around the kitchen. Mikey was banging a spoon on the tray connected to his high chair. Mrs. Larkin took Mikey's spoon away from him and gave him a piece of toast, which was quieter to bang, and then said, "Kids!"

Everyone quieted down.

"I have an important announcement," said Mrs. Larkin. "My friends Betty and Florence are coming to spend the night."

"Who're Fletty and Borence?" asked Beverly.

"*Betty and Florence*," said Mrs. Larkin. "You kids have never met them. We worked together at the factory. They live in New York City now. We're going to a reunion luncheon at the factory tomorrow."



Maryellen knew that Mom was referring to the aircraft factory where she had worked during World War Two. Her mind sped ahead. Lots of TV quiz shows were filmed in New York City. Maybe Mom's friends could get her a spot on one of them! She'd be the youngest contestant *ever*—

Joan interrupted Maryellen's daydream with a practical question. "Where will Betty and Florence sleep?"

Maryellen's mind sped ahead again. This could be the moment she had been waiting for! "I have an idea," she announced.

But Mom didn't hear Maryellen. No one did. Mom was saying, "I guess they'll have to sleep on the sofa bed in the living room, though that doesn't seem very welcoming."

"I've got an idea," Maryellen said again. She tugged on her mother's sleeve. "Listen!"

But Mrs. Larkin just patted Maryellen's hand and gave her a wink and a smile while everyone else kept

talking as much and as loudly as ever.

Maryellen grabbed Mikey's spoon and pounded it on the table the way she'd seen judges pound gavels in TV courtroom drama shows. "HEY!" she shouted. "Order in the court!"

Mom winced and held her hands over her ears. "Ellie, sweetie pie, settle down," she scolded gently. "Please don't shout and bang the table like Mikey. It's childish."

"Sorry, Mom," said Maryellen, red in the face. The last thing she wanted was for Mom to think that she was childish. "But listen—I have a great idea!"

"Tell us," said Mom. "You have our attention."

"I think Mom's guests should sleep in Joan and Carolyn's room."

"My room?" said Joan. "That's impossible! Carolyn and I hardly fit in there together as it is."

"We're squooshed!" Carolyn agreed. She and Joan shared a set of bunk beds in a tiny bedroom.

"I have it all figured out," said Maryellen. "Joan, you and Carolyn will give your room to Betty and Florence. You'll sleep in the big bedroom with Beverly and me, in Tom and Mikey's bunk beds, and the boys will sleep in Mom and Dad's room." Maryellen smiled at Tom. "You *like* sleeping on the floor, don't you?"

"Yes!" said Tom. He looked happy. But then, Tom just

about always looked happy. With spiky yellow hair sticking straight out all over his head, he looked like a cheerful dandelion.

Joan frowned. She started to say, "I don't—"

But Mom interrupted, "Why, Maryellen Larkin! I do believe you've hit upon a solution to our problem."

Maryellen beamed, although she wished that Mom hadn't sounded quite so surprised that she had had a good idea. Flushed with her success, she rattled on eagerly. "After Betty and Florence leave," she said, "Tom and Mikey can move into the little room, and the big room will be the All-Girls Room." Maryellen was sure that sharing a room with Joan and Carolyn would change everything for her, and change the way everyone thought of her and treated her, too. They'd see that she was mature. After all, she was nearly ten. She was going to be in the fourth grade!

"But—but," Joan sputtered, "that means *four* of us will share *one* closet and—"

"Whoa!" said Mrs. Larkin, holding up both hands. "Hold it, everyone." She turned to Maryellen and said, "Ellie, dear, you're getting carried away, as usual. We'll give Betty and Florence the little room tonight. But let's do one thing at a time, okay?"

"Sure, Mom," said Maryellen.

"All right then," said Mrs. Larkin. "Meeting adjourned."

Mom lifted Mikey out of his high chair, and he toddled behind Beverly and Tom to go watch cartoons on TV. But as Maryellen, Carolyn, and Mom started to leave, Joan stopped them.

"Just for the record," said Joan, "I'm not crazy about this whole room switcheroo."

"Why not?" asked Maryellen.

"Well," said Joan. "For starters, you're sloppy."

Maryellen could see that her sweaty hair and grimy hands were a sharp contrast to Joan's crisp, clean appearance. "Well, maybe I'm a little messy right *now*," she said honestly. She smoothed her rumpled T-shirt, which was a faded and stained hand-me-down from Carolyn. "I was playing outdoors."

"I know," said Joan. "You were goofing around with Davy like a wild tomboy, as usual. *That'll* have to stop soon anyway, because you can't be friends with a boy in fourth grade."

Maryellen frowned. "Why not?"

"It just doesn't work. You wait and see," Joan went on. "But it's not only your appearance that's grubby. Your bed, your drawers, your closet—*all* your things are messy. Last night, you flooded the bathroom, and before that,

you stepped in the popcorn bowl and overturned it. Face it, Ellie—you create a disaster area wherever you go."

"Hey!" said Carolyn, sticking up for Maryellen. "Just because Ellie's not persnickety like you doesn't mean she's a hopeless mess."

"Right!" said Maryellen indignantly. "And I don't create disasters. Do I, Mom?"

"Well," said Mrs. Larkin, "I think what Joan means is that you're not very tidy or organized, honey."

"See?" said Joan. "I don't think it's fair that I should have to share a room with such a messy little kid."

"A messy little kid?" Maryellen repeated, horrified. Granted, she was not a finicky fussbudget like Joan. But a *messy little kid*? One who was childish, wild, untidy, tomboyish, disorganized, and grubby? A messy little kid who created disasters wherever she went? Was that how Joan and—Maryellen gulped—*Mom* thought of her?

ADVERTISEMENT

To read the rest of *Maryellen: The One and Only*, and more of Maryellen's stories, visit your favorite bookseller or an American Girl store.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)