



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Primrose and Periwinkle

Faith Wynne

Two little girls made their way down the street one cold morning early in December. Everything about them, from their rather shabby hoods to their carefully patched shoes, spoke of a family that had once had more and now had very little. But their spirits were bright. Christmas was in the air, and they were studying the rooftops as they walked, playing a game they called "choose."

"I choose this one!" said Primrose, stopping in front of a big square old red-brick house. "The chimneys are so wide that Santa could climb down easily, without any danger of scraping his pack off and losing it in the fire — the way I suppose he's had to do at our house these last two Christmases."



Stepping back to the curb, the sisters cupped their red-mittened hands over their eyes to shield them from the sun. But poor Periwinkle stumbled and tumbled backward, bumping her head hard against the ground.

At that very moment the front door opened — a fluffy cat had been mewing to be let in — and out came a man with a kind, weathered face and snow-white hair. He hurried to help the fallen child and gathered both little girls gently inside.

"Grannie will warm you up," he said, leading them into a big room with an enormous fireplace and crackling logs, where a sweet-faced woman with silvery hair sat knitting. An old rocking bench was drawn up to the hearth, and the cat had already curled into her favourite corner, washing her pink nose with one white paw — perhaps to warm it.

Grannie Robb, as the whole neighbourhood fondly called her, slipped off Periwinkle's hood and examined the bump. "Now, will you tell me your names?" she asked.

"Primrose and Periwinkle Ray," the girls answered together — and Daddy Robb smiled at the odd pair of names.

Seeing the couple exchange a glance, Primrose explained quickly. "They're not our real names. We were christened Lucy and Lydia. But our mother used to

read us an old book of myths and fairy tales, and we loved it so much that we named ourselves after flowers in it, and called our home 'Tanglewood.' Santa always labelled our presents 'Primrose' and 'Periwinkle,' so we're afraid to change our names now — he might not know us otherwise. Though he's never managed to get down our aunt's chimney. It's far too small."

"We used to have a big fireplace like this one," she went on, "and we'd hang our stockings on either side on Christmas Eve. In the morning they were always full—"

"Overflowing!" Periwinkle chimed in. "And our dolls would be tucked into little cradles on the hearth. Oh, we had such happy times — before the old house burned down, and Papa lost his money, and then he died. And after that dear Mamma died too, and we went to live with Auntie Ellen. She's so good to us, but I'm afraid we're two mouths too many."

"As soon as we're grown, we're going to work and help her," said Primrose stoutly.

"We try not to eat too much," Periwinkle added, "because Joey and Cissy are little and need more than we do."

At that, Grannie and Daddy quietly stepped out of the room.

"I do believe," whispered Primrose, her eyes shining, "that they're like the kind old couple from our storybook — the ones who welcomed weary strangers in from the cold."

And when the pair returned carrying a big pitcher of milk and a plate of warm rolls and honey, the girls were quite sure of it. They had had only a thin breakfast, and the cold walk had left them very hungry.

The cat left her corner, set her dainty paws in Primrose's lap, and sniffed the food until her whiskers quivered, asking — in the plainest cat language — for just one little lap from the bowl.

"That's not how well-behaved cats do things," Grannie told her gently. "Your place is on the hearth, where there's a saucer of milk waiting." The cat gave a motherly little cry, and out from under the couch scrambled three small kittens she'd left sleeping. They ran on their stubby legs as fast as they could, dipped their noses too deep into the milk, and coughed and sputtered until they nearly choked — which made the little girls laugh with delight.

"Have you named them yet?" Primrose asked.

"Not yet," said Grannie. "Can you think of some nice names?"

"Oh yes — we named ours after flowers too! Sweet Fern, Cowslip, Squash

Blossom, and Dandelion. Don't you think 'Squash Blossom' would be just the perfect name for that little yellow one?"

"Well, yes," said Grannie, smiling. "Squash Blossom she shall be."

"And the mother cat is a bit yellow herself, so 'Dandelion' would suit her, wouldn't it?" said Periwinkle.

"I'm sure it would," Grannie agreed. "And the other two shall be Fern and Cowslip."

After a while the old couple slipped out again, and the two sisters, between mouthfuls of bread and sips of milk, put their heads together and built little castles in the air. They had made up their minds to be brave and ask a question — though Primrose wanted Periwinkle to ask it, and Periwinkle wanted Primrose to. When the kind couple came back, they found the girls whispering, cheeks pink and shy.

At last Periwinkle, still grateful for the care shown to her poor bumped head, slipped her small hand into Grannie's and said with many blushes, "Would you let two very poor little folks, who only have very small chimneys, hang their stockings here at the end of your fireplace on Christmas Eve?"

"If their names are Primrose and Periwinkle," said Grannie, pressing the little hand, "I'm quite sure we would."

"No — their names are Joey and Cissy, our cousins," said Periwinkle, a shadow of disappointment crossing her face. "We've had presents from Santa before. Joey and Cissy never have."

"Well, bless your generous little hearts," said Daddy warmly. "There's room for four stockings. You shall each have your own nail." Grannie nodded and quietly wiped something from the corner of her eye.

When the girls set off home with happy hearts, Daddy walked with them, carrying a big basket of food and Grannie's promise to visit Auntie Ellen soon.

That night the dear old couple sat up talking almost until morning. Long ago they had lost two little girls of about the same age as Primrose and Periwinkle — and Periwinkle's dimpled cheek and Primrose's sunny hair had stirred tender, aching memories of them. But by the rosy light of dawn there was a smile on each old face, for they had planned a sweet surprise: one that would bring warmth to a cheerless home and make their own hearts blossom again.

The very next evening the couple set out on their happy errand. Through a broken shutter, the glow of a lamp showed a lovely picture inside a humble little room: Primrose and Periwinkle, heads bent together over the pages of their beloved book of myths — which they had discovered, to their joy, tucked at the

very bottom of the big basket the day before.

I only have room to tell you how it all turned out.

Primrose and Periwinkle found a new home — a real home — in the big old red-brick house, and in the hearts of the kind old couple. And Auntie Ellen, with Joey and Cissy, was moved out of the cramped, comfortless flat and into a snug little cottage in one corner of Mr. Robb's garden. "Almost as good as living under the very same roof," the children said.

And on Christmas Eve, four small stockings hung around the wide old fireplace, filled to overflowing — with the extra spilling into cradles and across tables — just the way it had been in the happy days the girls still called "Used to Be."

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