

One

On early summer mornings, Millerton is a sleepy town, the houses nodding in the heavy air. Not even six-thirty and I can feel the humidity seeping through the window shades and covering me like a blanket. Everything I touch is damp.

I'm pretty sure I am the only one in the house who is awake. I lie in bed for a while, listening to the birds. I'm not about to spend the morning in bed, though, even if it is the first day of summer vacation. Some of my classmates wait all year long for summer just so they can sleep late every morning. Not me. I have way too much to do. I roll out of bed, dress in shorts and sandals and the sleeveless blouse Miss Hagerty made for me on her Singer sewing machine. The blouse is white with a big X of blue rickrack across the front.

I tiptoe down the hallway. My room is at one end, the

staircase at the other. In between are my parents' room, Miss Hagerty's room, Mr. Penny's room, Angel Valentine's room, a small guest room, a bathroom, a powder room. (It is a long hallway.) It must be 6:45, because just as I pass Mr. Penny's room, it erupts with chiming and clanging and peeping and chirping. Mr. Penny used to run a clock repair shop. He's retired now, but his room is filled with clocks, and of course they all run perfectly. At quarter past, half past, and quarter to every hour, they ding and cheep and whir, sounds we have all grown used to and can sleep through at night. On the hour itself, cuckoos pop out of their wooden houses, one clock chimes like a ship's bell, animals waltz, skaters glide. Mr. Penny even has a grandfather clock, which I think he should have, since he could be a grandfather if he had ever had any children. A sun and a moon move across the face of that clock. And even though Mr. Penny is not one for kids (not now, never has been), he lets me wind it with the little crank once a week, keeping my eye on the weights inside until they are in just the right position. Mr. Penny says I am responsible.

I tiptoe down the stairs and into the kitchen. I am still the only one up. This is good. If I'm going to start breakfast for everyone I like to have the kitchen to myself. I set out some of the things Cookie will need when she arrives. Cookie is our cook and she helps Mom with the meals for our boarders. Her real name is Raye Bennett, which I think

is beautiful, a name for a heroine in a novel, but everyone calls her Cookie, so I do too. I sometimes wonder if she wouldn't like to be called Raye or Mrs. Bennett, but nobody in our family asks too many questions.

In the summer I am in charge of Miss Hagerty's breakfast tray. Miss Hagerty is the only one of our boarders who takes breakfast in her room. This is primarily because she is old, but also because oh my goodness no one must see her before she has had a chance to put her face on, and she needs energy for that job. So every morning I make up her tray, which is always the same — a soft-boiled egg in a cup, a plate of toast with the crusts cut off, and a pot of tea. Since Miss Hagerty appreciates beauty, I put a pansy in a bud vase in the corner of her tray.

Seven-fifteen now, a key in the front door, and suddenly the kitchen comes alive. Cookie bustles in at the same time Mom and Dad stumble downstairs. My parents are still in their pajamas, smelling of sleep, and in Dad's case, of Lavoris mouthwash.

“Good morning,” I say.

“Good morning!” cries Cookie, always cheerful.

“Morning,” mumble Mom and Dad.

Mom collapses onto a kitchen chair. “Hattie,” she says, “you've already fixed Miss Hagerty's tray?”

Well, yes. I am holding it right in front of me.

“She’s industrious,” says Cookie, who has opened four cupboards, taken the carton of eggs out of the refrigerator, and turned on the fire under the skillet. “Like me.”

I am pleased by Cookie’s comment, but I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing.

Mom considers me. “She could be a little less industrious and a little more outgoing.”

I stalk out of the kitchen, the moment ruined. I would like to stomp up the stairs, but I can’t since I am carrying the tray and I don’t want to slosh tea around.

I knock at Miss Hagerty’s door.

“Dearie?” she calls. For as long as I have known Miss Hagerty (which is all my life, because she has lived in our boardinghouse since before I was born), she has never called me anything but Dearie. When I was little, I thought maybe she couldn’t remember my name. But I notice she doesn’t call anyone else Dearie, so I am pleased that it is her special name for me.

“Morning, Miss Hagerty,” I call back. “Can I come in?”

“*Entrez*,” she replies grandly.

I balance the tray on one hand and open the door with my other. I am just about the only person who is allowed to see Miss Hagerty early in the morning before she has put her face on. And she is something. She is propped up in bed, a great perfumy mountain. Some of the mountain is Miss Hagerty’s astonishing bedding — floral sheets and quilts

and lace-edged pillows, woolen throws that Miss Hagerty and her friends knitted. She sleeps under the same mound of bedding whether the temperature is 90 degrees or 20 degrees. The rest of the mountain is Miss Hagerty herself. Miss Hagerty reminds me of her bedding — soft and perfumed, her plump body always draped in floral.

I place the tray on Miss Hagerty's lap. She prefers to eat her breakfast in bed. I draw back her curtains, then sit in an armchair and look around. There is barely a free inch of space in Miss Hagerty's room. The sewing table is piled high with fabric. From her quilted sewing bags spill cards of lace and bias tape, buttons and needles and snaps. Every other surface of the room is covered with perfume bottles, china birds, wooden boxes, and glass bud vases.

Neatly arranged on her dresser are twelve framed photos of me, one taken on the day I was born, and the others taken on each of my birthdays since then. I see myself change from a chubby baby to a chubby toddler to a skinny little girl to a skinny older girl, watch my hair lighten to near white, see the curls fall away to be replaced by braids. I think the photo mirror is a great honor. Miss Hagerty says she considers me her granddaughter. And I wish she were my grandmother. That has to be a private wish, though, since I already have two grandmothers. It's just that Granny lives in Kentucky and I hardly ever see her, and Nana . . . well, Nana is Nana.