



*A Corner  
of the Universe*

Ann M. Martin

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# One

**O**n 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 whirl, 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.

“Miss Hagerty,” I say while she begins the process of

slathering the toast with the egg, which she has mushed up in its cup, “what’s wrong with being shy?”

“Nothing at all, Dearie. Why?”

“I don’t know.” I can’t quite look at Miss Hagerty.

“Well, don’t you worry about getting a boyfriend. Trust me, even shy girls get boyfriends.”

That was the last thing on my mind, but it is a fascinating thought. Almost as fascinating as the fact that Miss Hagerty, never married herself, is practically an expert on boyfriends and husbands. Not to mention on hairstyling and makeup. She is always saying things to me like, “Dearie, you could soften those sharp cheekbones of yours with a little blush — right here.” Or, “Look, Dearie, how this eyeliner will make your gray eyes spring to life.” I am not allowed to wear makeup yet, but I store up these tips for when I am in high school.

Later, when I leave Miss Hagerty’s room with the breakfast tray, I try to imagine myself with a boyfriend. I could be like Zelda Gilroy on *Dobie Gillis*. Or maybe I should be like Thalia Menninger, since she’s the girl Dobie is always after. And I wouldn’t put him off, like Thalia does. I would be happy to sit with Dobie in the malt shop. He’s a little old for me, but he’s awfully cute. I would wear swirly skirts, and blouses with puffy sleeves, and wide patent leather belts, and I would tease my hair so it puffed out behind a pink



elastic headband. At the malt shop, Dobie and I would buy one malt with two straws so we could sip from it together, and everyone who saw us would know we were boyfriend and girlfriend. I only hope that Dobie would do the talking for both of us and it really wouldn't matter that I'm shy.

As I carry Miss Hagerty's tray down the hall Mr. Penny comes out of his room wearing wrinkled pants and a wrinkled shirt, and his morning face. I say, "Hi, Mr. Penny," and keep on going because he absolutely cannot have a conversation until he has a cup of coffee in him.

I take the tray back to the kitchen, and join Mom and Dad, now dressed and fresh looking, in the dining room for breakfast. Mr. Penny will join us later, I know, but Angel Valentine will not. Angel watches her waistline, plus she is ambitious about her secretarial job at the bank, and she says it makes a good impression if she is at her desk in the morning before her boss arrives. So Angel breezes into the dining room dressed like one of those Dobie Gillis girls, gulps down a cup of coffee, and runs out the door calling, "Enjoy your first day of vacation, Hattie."

I think Angel is absolutely wonderful, and I wish I were her little sister, even though I have known her for only a month.

After breakfast, everybody bustles off. Mr. Penny, who is

generally in a hurry, says he must go into town lickety-split, right now, he has errands to do. Miss Hagerly decides to sit on the front porch and knit. Cookie gets busy with lunch. Toby diAngeli shows up to help Mom clean the bedrooms. And Dad goes to work in his third-floor studio.

My father is an artist. He has been commissioned to paint two portraits for a friend of Nana and Papa's. I plan to stand behind him and watch, which Dad swears does not make him nervous. Mostly what I watch are his right hand and the paintbrush at the end of it. That hand, the one that's so important to him that he has actually tried to insure it, is a wondrous thing. Stained with ink, sticky with paint, fingernails surrounded by grime that can only be removed with turpentine, his hand flashes a paintbrush across a canvas and transforms it from a wash of white to a face or a country road or a bowl of fruit, with depth and light and shadows. I feel like I am watching a magician.

Sometimes Dad gives me a small canvas of my own and we paint together. I stick to abstracts, except for horses.

My father is almost always doing something interesting. If he's not painting, then he's working in our gardens. Or fixing something in the house. Or making greeting cards (he can even make the kind that pop up). Or taking photos and developing them himself. Or running around with the movie camera. Which is why I can feel that angry flush creep

across my cheeks whenever Nana implies that Mom married beneath her. My father can do anything, it seems. But according to Nana he has cast a shadow on our family by turning our home into a boardinghouse. Dad, however, says he is lucky to be able to support his family and his career by running the boardinghouse.

I hurry up the stairs to the third floor and am about to dash into Dad's studio when I come to such a fast stop that I have to grab on to the door to catch myself. I have almost stepped on Dad's project.

He's not painting after all.

"Ooh, what is this?" I say. "Another movie?" Dad spent several weeks last year making an animated movie called *Queen for a Day*. In it a very mean cardboard queen with curly hair chases her husband the king all around their castle, trying to kill him. The king gets the better of her, though, and has her head chopped off. At which point, the queen flies up to heaven with angel wings but is turned away and sent downward to be consumed by orange and red paper flames. The movie is three and a half minutes long. I have watched it over and over again. I am about the only audience the movie has ever had.

I look at what is spread on the floor now. I do not see any queens or flames or angel wings. What I see instead are hundreds of pieces of paper in varying sizes, shapes, and col-

ors. As I watch, my father inches a small blue paper circle closer to a larger blue paper circle. Then he takes a frame of it with his 16-millimeter movie camera.

“It’s called *Abstract*,” Dad replies. “The shapes are going to move all around the screen. They’ll rearrange themselves, form new patterns. The colors will shift. . . .” He inches the circle even closer to the other circle, then edges a tiny blue dot into the picture.

I think about Nana. Nana wishes Dad had a real job, like Papa does. She wishes he were a lawyer or a businessman, something proper. But an artist? Worse, an artist who sometimes makes things he’s not even going to sell?

As if Dad is reading my mind, he says, still inching those shapes around, “By the way, Nana is coming over for lunch today.”

“Nana?” I repeat.

“Yes.”

“Is coming for lunch?”

“Yes.”

“Coming over here for lunch?”

“Yes.”

“For lunch today?”

Dad looks up and smiles at me. “We’ll survive, Hattie.”

I am not so sure. Suddenly I feel like getting out of the house. I look at my watch. Ten o’clock. That is a fine time

for my daily walk into town. Plus on the way I have to stop at Betsy's to say good-bye to her. If I take long enough with both of these activities maybe I'll miss lunch altogether.

"I'm going over to Betsy's," I say. "See you later."

I don't know whether Dad hears me. He has to fiddle with that dot.