

Becoming a Person

"Margaret, why would you even *think* about trying to go to school?" reprimands Mother.

"I'm sorry." I mutter.

"You know that you can't go to school. School's for boys. You're a girl."

"But I want to learn math, and reading. It's not fair. Why do *boys* get the privileges, and all we get is housework?" I whine.

Mother sighs and rubs her temples. "At home is where *you* should be. And for heaven sake, what's behind your apron?" Her dark brown eyes search me, as they fall on a lump on the apron. "What's that?" demands Mother?

"N-nothing." I stammer.

Mother pulls at my apron, exposing the book I'd been hiding.

"Give it." Mother says with gritted teeth. "Give it or—"

Suddenly, there's a knock on the door.

Mother slowly opens the door. She turns the brass knob, and the door opens with a large *creak*, revealing a young woman. Mother expression changes from nervous to surprised, then to delight.

"Hey, Nellie!" Mother gushes.

Nellie McClung is one of Mother's old friend from church. She is a well accomplished woman, being a social activist fighting for women's rights, and an author of sixteen books. Once, in the paper, we saw an article about a "Mock Parliament" she had set up. She had rented a theatre, and casting herself as premier, she had debated the question: "Should men be allowed to vote?" It had received lots of attention, and this might've been what caused Manitoba to be the first Canadian province to have the women gain the vote.

"I'm here to ask for a favor." Nellie, says. "Could you sign a petition?"

"What kind of petition?" asks Mother?

"A petition to allow women to become 'persons'." She answers.

"Do you have a pen-?" she asks.

"What's a petition?" I ask, interrupting Mother.

"Margaret, don't interrupt me." cries Mother. The look on her face sends a clear message: *I will scold you after my friend leaves.*

"No, it's okay." Nellie says. "This petition is to let women become persons under the law."

"But I thought everyone's a person." I say, surprised.

"The government doesn't think so." She says. "Go ahead and read more, and work hard at school when you get there. Then you'll understand."

"But I'm not allowed. Mother says so." I say.

Mother sends me another look.

"If you want to go to school with the boys, go to school with the boys. You're probably just as smart, and twice as fast as those boys, anyway." Nellie smiles. Not one of the fake proper smiles Mother sometimes puts on, but a genuine one. "Whatever you want to do, you can do it. Just go for it." she says.

"Thank you, Mrs.-" I pause uncertainly.

"Just call me Nellie." She laughs.

Mother and Nellie make some more small talk as Mother signs the petition. As Nellie leaves, she smiles and winks at me.

I look at her shadow walking away as the words *you'll understand one day and become persons* echo around in my head.

26 years later

The familiar sound of the hospital surrounds me as the bleeping of the machines and the chatter around the rooms blend into one white noise. I am now a doctor, and I know that I have the potential to change the world. If it weren't for Nellie McClung, right now I'd be washing the dishes. Instead, I'm saving and changing lives. And I had just started my campaign to spread equality to women in other countries. Thank you, Nellie McClung.

References:

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nellie_McClung
- <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/the-role-of-british-women-in-the-twentieth-century/women-in-1900/>
- <http://www.ournellie.com/about-nellie/published-works/>