

Girl of the City

History 271 – Dr. Devine

Tues-Thurs 12:30-1:45

By Don'Angelica Silva

I think I finally know the difference between a boy and a girl. I know that sounds funny coming from a sixteen year old Polish girl living in New York City in 1907; but spending so much time doing my “women’s duties” as momma would say, I’ve had time to think about it. Of course by now I should’ve seen a vaudeville show like my brother Patryk, or watched Buffalo Bill save a band of settlers in the Wild West from wild savages ready to burn down their village like Alfons saw down at the Irish Nickelodeon on 7th avenue. My best friend Marta says, “Cecylia Nowicki, We should have been born boys if we wanted to live free and enjoy the world”. I knew what she meant, for most girls my age were already young mothers; stuck at home caring for the younger children and watching our brothers enjoy the city.

Both me and Marta have thirteen year old brothers who have been working as newsies for the New York Journal since they were eleven years old. Patryk has been the savior in the family ever since my papa was fired from his job delivering furniture for the Marshall Field’s department store when he fell down a flight of stairs trying to carry a piano up three flights of stairs with little Johnny Russo. Word has gotten around that “Albert Nowicki can’t keep a decent job long enough to collect a paycheck”. The truth is, Papa was getting hired at local factories around the city and making good money but got fired each time because he can’t stand for long periods ever since he hurt his back during the fall. Now papa finds work in sweatshops around town to help out as much as he can. Momma says we should be thankful to Patrick, because of the extra money he makes from selling the newspapers we can pay our fifteen dollar a month rent for our two rooms in the tenement.

I do feel lucky. In our two rooms lives papa, momma, my brother Patryk, my four and five year old sisters Rasine and Irena, a Polish immigrant Mr. Klemens, and me. Momma said we could be like Mr. and Mrs. Kaminski who have seven children, Mr. Kaminski’s brother, and

a Russian immigrant family with a mother, father, and five children all living in a cellar in the four story tenement across the alley from us. To tell the truth, most people we know live with at least ten people.

Momma took in sewing jobs for Mrs. Finnegan, the rich Irish women who owned her own tailor shop down on Fifth Avenue. Momma says Mrs. Finnegan is a snobbish woman who doesn't even feel she needs to look directly at momma when she assigns the work each week. Momma says she's been a little nicer since word got around that her oldest daughter Elatha was arrested for smoking a cigarette in public. She even offered momma a chair from her shop that was torn on the seat and needed to be replaced. As Mrs. Finnegan put it, "I may as well give you this chair; it's going to end up in the junkyard next to your tenement anyway." Momma had no way to bring it home so she told Mrs. Flannigan, "We'll just pick it up from the junkyard when it gets there." Momma can be funny sometimes.

Since we live in Brooklyn, momma takes the trolley to Manhattan to pick up her work and then returns it a week later when she's finished. Momma has been going to Manhattan twice a week for almost eight months to pick up the dresses from Mrs. Finnegan's shop to work on but she hasn't taken me once. She says she needs me to care for Rasine and Irena. I do this most of the day while momma goes to the market, downtown, or any other business she needs to tend to. Of course, Patryk has already been to Manhattan. I even heard him in the alley behind the tenement telling his friends that he saw a ladies corset in the Marshall Field's department store window. They believed him but I think he is lying. Why would a high class department store do such a disgraceful thing?

This summer I had finally come into a stroke of good luck. Patryk came running home with news of the bubonic plague in San Francisco. We all immediately knew what this meant for

us. Patryk would be selling many more newspapers which meant more money for the family. Patryk always sold more papers than any of the boys in the neighborhood. He had a method that he said worked every time and he even tried to show Marta's brother Alfons. He hid most of his papers nearby the spot where he stood so the person buying the paper felt they were buying a newspaper that must be interesting because it was almost sold out. He also yelled the "big story" out so loud and so exciting that you knew you wanted to read it so that you would know facts about the story everyone was surely going to be talking about. The trouble was most times Patryk had added so much to the story to get people to buy the paper that the real story was nowhere near the story Patryk yelled out.

"The Black Death kills thousands of people in the West." "Rats are spreading the disease." Not only were the business men buying the papers but landladies, butchers, factory workers; anyone who could scrape up the penny to pay for it. People from the old country are terribly afraid of epidemics, and rats are everywhere in New York City. Most weeks that July Patryk bought twice as many papers from the circulation manager as he normally did and sold every paper. Each night that week, Patryk brought home his contribution to the family's survival. Of course this was after he gave himself a hefty portion of what he felt he deserved. Momma and papa didn't say anything about him keeping money for himself every since Mr. Nowak's son Fryderyk ran away after being accused of "stealing food out of his own sisters and brothers mouth" because he used part of his money selling newspapers to buy himself a new pair of boots. They just pretend they don't notice him talking about movie pictures he has seen or coming home on a full stomach and not wanting to eat dinner.

But this time, even I saw Patryk as a hero when papa blurted out that we had made so much money that this weekend we were going to take a trip to Coney Island's Steeplechase

Amusement Park next weekend. The house erupted with happiness and joy, something that rarely ever happens in our house or any tenement for that matter. Most people are overworked at home and work, crowded in the streets as well as where they sleep and are hungry for that something that will give them freedom from their everyday tedium. Rasine and Irena danced around the wooded tenement floor; even they had heard the children in the neighborhood laughing and telling tales of a whole day of rest, picnics, swimming and games. Momma told papa that maybe it wouldn't be respectable for a young girl like me to be at such a park as this where women ride on the back of horses holding tight to some young man. I was shocked when I heard Patryk say, "Everyone has been to Steeplechase Park Momma; even Mrs. Finnegan and her family were there last month." Momma said alright, not questioning how Patryk knew such a thing. We all knew that he had probably seen Mrs. Finnegan on one of the many trips to Coney Island that he had secretly taken with the newspaper money.

I spent that last week in July daydreaming as I did my daily work of caring for my sisters, helping my mother do the sewing for Mrs. Finnegan, washing Mr. Klemen's clothes, scrubbing the tenement rooms, and preparing the meals for the family. I thought I was daydreaming when I heard Patryk run through the door with another headline, "Steeplechase Park burned to the ground today!" "Well I guess we won't be able to go the park now."

My heart sunk. I felt that freedom, fun and happiness weren't meant for me. Then my mother said the words that made me know that my feelings weren't wrong. "Well, I guess this big story will mean more money for the family, we'll need it once the new baby gets here." Yes, the new baby. The new baby sister or brother I would be expected to raise. I hope for this baby's sake it's born a boy; even though I wasn't so lucky.