Marie Curie and Her Daughters

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In the year 1867, in the city of Warsaw, Poland, a little girl called Manya was born, the youngest of the Sklodowska family. The children were clever as can be, just like their parents.

Her father Władysław taught all day in a school for boys, and her mother Bronisława stayed at home and looked after them. But it hadn't always been that way.

'Mama', Manya used to ask, 'Did you used to teach like Papa? Why did you stop?'

'Because', her mother would reply with a small smile, 'It's an awful lot to manage so many little ones ...'

Manya didn't think this was much of an explanation and nor did her older sister Bronya. The two little girls would play teachers, pretending they were just like their mother.

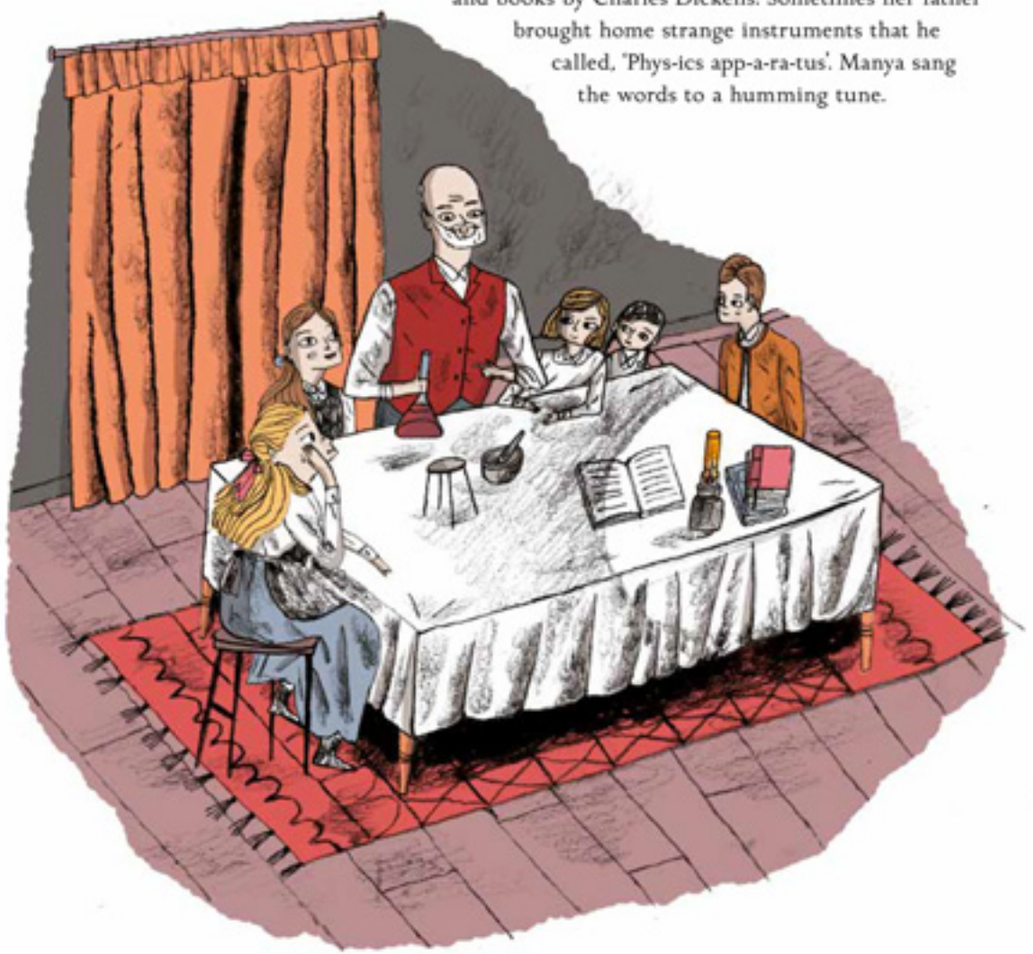
When Manya was ten, her mother became ill, coughing and spending all day in bed. 'Papa', she asked, 'Is Mama ok?'



But it wasn't to be.

On a windy day in Warsaw, four little children lined up in a row, all dressed in black for their mother's funeral. Manya knew things would never be the same again.

Every day, their father came home tired from a long day teaching, but he always made time to study with them. They sat around the table after dinner reading aloud – fairy tales, poems and books by Charles Dickens. Sometimes her father brought home strange instruments that he called, 'Phys-ics app-a-ra-tus'. Manya sang the words to a humming tune.



And so they were four clever and motherless children. They studied hard at school and, one after the other, passed their exams with a gold medal each – the Sktodowska children were always top of the class.



When Manya turned 16, she wanted to carry on her studies. But she was a girl, and girls couldn't go to University in Warsaw.



She was also Polish and the Russian government who ruled in Poland at the time banned children from learning in their own language or learning their own history. They also banned the new, radical science that Manya's father taught her at home.

One evening, their father came home whispering of rumours about a secret school where Manya and Bronya could study with real professors. So they joined the Flying University. They studied Polish, anatomy, history, and best of all, chemistry and physics in backrooms and drawing rooms across the city. It was dangerous. If they were caught, they would be arrested. With every step on the stair and every creak of the door handle, they all jumped.



But it was worth it. They studied by candlelight, dreaming of becoming doctors and scientists.

They tutored all day for a few coins and added them to jars, the ones labelled 'someday' or 'perhaps'. More than anything, they wanted to save enough to go to Paris to study at the university, the Sorbonne.

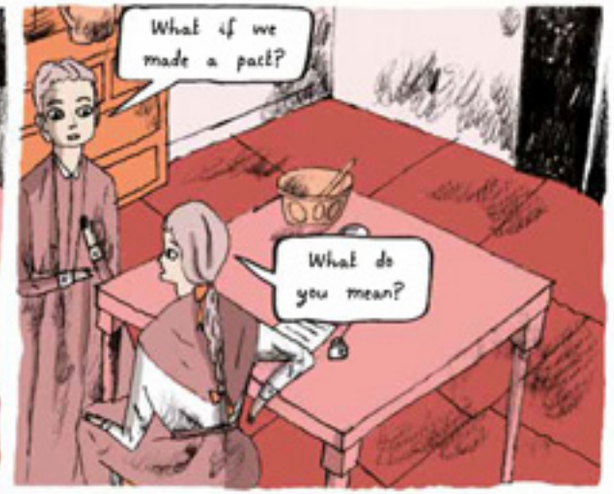
But a year passed, and then two. They counted their savings and began to lose hope – they earnt so little.



But Manya had an idea . . .





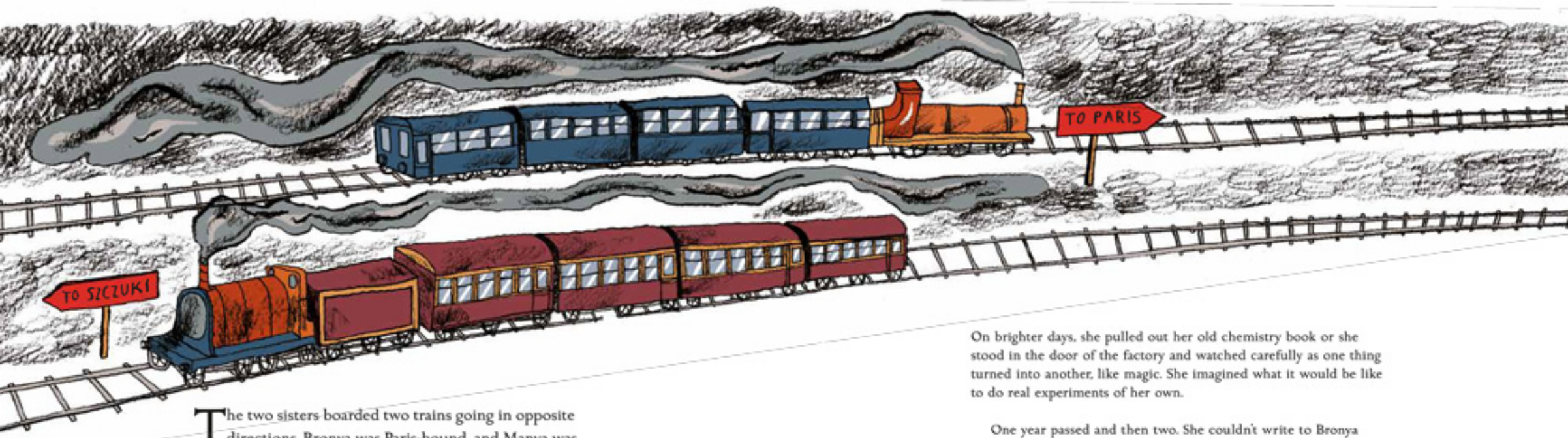












The two sisters boarded two trains going in opposite directions. Bronya was Paris-bound, and Manya was bound for a little town called Szczuki, miles away from Warsaw, and alone without her family.

After three hours in a train and four in a sleigh, Manya eventually found her way to a villa with a sloping roof, which was next to a factory that spluttered and stuttered all day long.

She taught the factory owner's children, but they were spoiled and wouldn't do as they were told. Meanwhile, the children in the village couldn't read or write and had no teacher. It wasn't fair, when Manya's whole life was dedicated to just two ungrateful children. So, Manya asked for permission to teach eighteen little children in the village in the dusky evenings, by candlelight.

It was her only joy and her only consolation.



On brighter days, she pulled out her old chemistry book or she stood in the door of the factory and watched carefully as one thing turned into another, like magic. She imagined what it would be like to do real experiments of her own.

One year passed and then two. She couldn't write to Bronya because she couldn't afford the stamps that went all the way to Paris. She could only imagine what life was like there. Soon, she forgot what it was to learn and she forgot what it was to hope.

Years passed and she had all but given up.





But Manya got lucky. Her father wrote to say he had a new job. He could pay Manya back for all she had given to Bronya. He could pay for Manya's studies too, if she liked.

Another letter arrived from Bronya, who was soon to be a real doctor, inviting her to live with her and her new husband in Paris.

It was everything she had dreamed of. But Manya was twenty-three years old now, and it was years since she'd left school. She was scared to leave Warsaw. She didn't want to be behind everyone else. Was she really clever enough?



She hesitated. She told Bronya she wasn't ready.

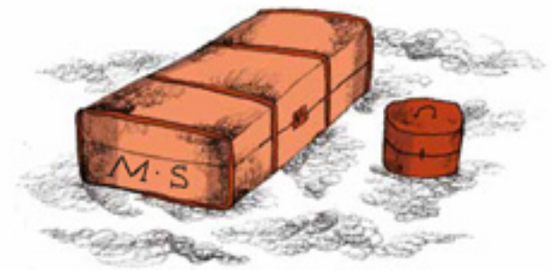


She settled back in to life in Warsaw. But before long, an invitation arrived from her cousin Joseph. He worked at the local museum.

Nobody thought there was anything strange in a quiet young woman going to visit her cousin. But little did they know, behind the dusty cases and the neatly arranged displays, hidden in the back room there was a real, working laboratory. If the Russian authorities had discovered it, they would have closed it down because experiments were dangerous and corrupting and ... truly thrilling!

This was the first time Manya was able to try out the complicated theories she had read about.

This was the first time she had done a real experiment.
And she loved it.



When the autumn winds of 1891 swept through Warsaw, Manya changed her mind and followed them to Paris. It would be a very long journey.

On an old wooden trunk she painted the letters M. S., and packed her clothes, her shoes and two hats – her entire life in a little box. Her father wept.

On the station platform, she collected her things together. She had packed food and drink and a little folding chair to sit on. She had bought the cheapest ticket there was. She had books, of course, and a quilt for the cold nights when her breath hung in the air and the carriage rocked her to sleep.



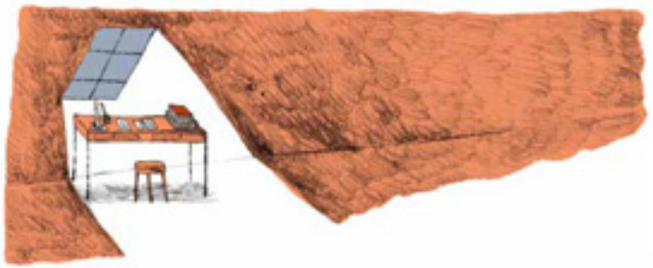
Her father kissed her on the cheek and handed her a little bag of caramels.

Her father turned and disappeared into the fog of the station. And Manya turned and settled down for the three-day journey ahead. The train rattled across Europe, speeding up as it reached France.

When the train pulled up in Gare du Nord station, Manya stepped down, tired and alone. Then, waving through the mist ... was Bronya, with her growing, pregnant belly.



Manya was in Paris at last.

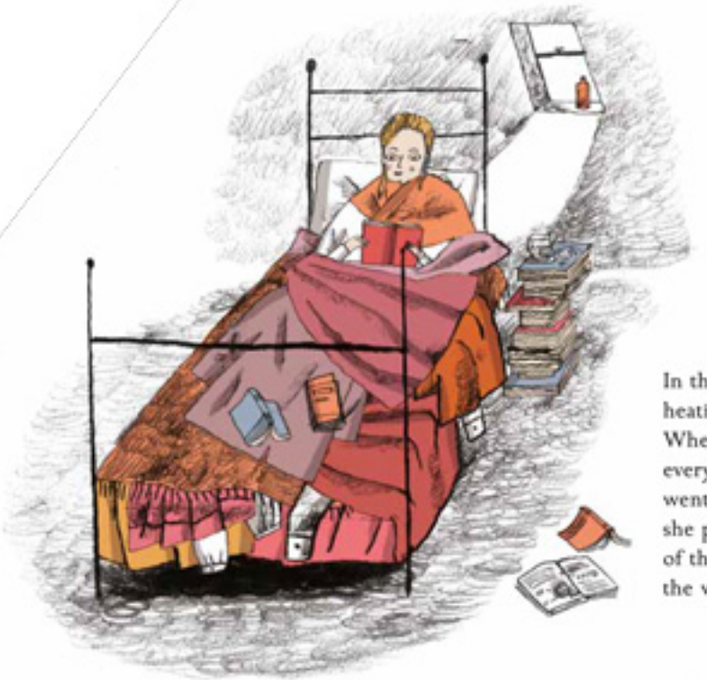


On her first day, she arrived at the Sorbonne early and signed her name – Marie, with the French spelling. This was the start of her new life.

Soon she moved into a place of her own, a small attic room near the Sorbonne, in an area called the Latin Quarter that was full of artists, students and other Polish people like her.

Marie studied hard, fiercely clever but also fiercely shy. Her fellow students spoke French so quickly, so she had to practise and practise to keep up. Many of the other students couldn't pronounce her name, Skłodowska. She was ...





In that first winter, she had no heating, light or running water. When she got into bed, she wore everything she owned and her fingers went numb. One night it was so cold, she piled up all the furniture on top of the covers to try and stay warm, as the water in the basin turned to ice.

She was learning maths, physics and chemistry. She loved the silence of the laboratory, her eyes squinting in concentration and being on her feet all day. Marie worked hard to fill the gaps that her strange, poor childhood had given her. She worked all day and studied all night until nobody could say she was left behind. In two years, she had her Master's degree in Physics. She was awarded her Master's degree in Maths the year after.

