

## The Locket

“Warren, stop that. You’re scuffing your new shoes and getting them dusty,” exclaimed Bellarose Delainie McNeal, Warren’s 15-year-old sister with azure eyes and blonde hair cascading in clusters of curls to her waistline. “Mama will whip your behind if you scratch your expensive, brand-new shoes. You need to be more careful with your things! Hurry up. Let’s get home before the storm. Stop dawdling!” Delainie carried her books in front of her ample chest to block some wind as she kept turning to see her brother.

Warren rolled his eyes as his freckled cheeks turned scarlet red. The precocious, energetic, smart-as-a-whip, 10-year-old with dark auburn hair like their father, Robert, said, “I don’t care, Miss Bossy. I’m cold, hungry, and bored! Tell me a story.” He ran five feet to catch up with his long-legged, 5’8” sister.

Delainie said, “If you behave, I’ll tell you a story about an old miser. He’s in the book, “Silas Marner,” that I’m reading.”

“I know what a miser is.”

“Your vocabulary always surprises me. Delainie walked rapidly to get home before the rain. She hurried, so they’d not be late and worry her mother. She enchanted Warren to ensure that he would keep up with no distractions.

Delainie looked at the sorrowful trees losing their brightly, colored leaves on this overcast, blustery October day. She stopped once during their mile walk in the piercing, cold

wind to adjust Warren's muffler and pull his blue cap's earflaps over his ears. She buttoned her brown, herringbone coat and wrapped her tan muffler more tightly around her neck.

Phoebe McNeal, who Delainie favored exactly, kept her long, blonde hair in a tightly-wrapped chignon during the day as she busied herself with the many tasks of a homemaker and mother. She heard the porch door slam shut. She said, "Cookies are in the jar. Have one and a glass of milk before your homework." She stood stirring a pot of vegetable soup and checking on the wheat bread in the oven of her Common Sense wood-burning stove.

Delainie said, "I'm leaving soon to mind Mrs. Anderson's twins for several hours. I need the money. I'll eat later."

Phoebe asked, "How much money have you saved to purchase the red velvet material?"

"I've got twelve dollars, but I need eight more to purchase four yards at the mercantile. It will be hard to earn since the days get shorter and mothers don't go out in the late afternoons if they can't get home before dark. Soon I'll be minding children on Saturdays only. I need all \$20.00 in three weeks; otherwise, I won't have enough time to make the dress and keep up with my homework before the community Christmas dance. The puffed sleeves will be hard for me. You'll help, please?"

"Yes, now hurry or you'll be late."

Delainie thought of the red velvet and her pattern with a jewel neckline and leg-of-mutton sleeves. She couldn't wait to hear the soothing, humming sound of the Singer machine. She enjoyed sewing just like her mother and continually improved her talents.

Thankfully, Delainie didn't have to buy any white lace to trim the neckline and sleeves. Months ago, she'd searched through Phoebe's sewing trunk full of leftover yardage of laces and ribbons from the days when she was the dress designer and seamstress in town.

Delainie still needed a fabulous lavalier to adorn the neckline. Ever since she was 12, she wanted a locket. She hadn't asked for a 14-karat gold locket like her mother's locket. She wanted a sterling silver locket since she liked sterling better and she knew it was more affordable. Several months before every birthday and Christmas since age 12, she hinted to both of her parents that this is what she truly wanted. Her 16th birthday would be on December 4 and the Christmas dance was on Saturday, December 16, 1933. If she received a locket for her birthday, there would be time to put photographs inside it before the dance. Delainie thought that she would put photographs of her parents inside it, but she knew one day there could be a photograph of her husband or perhaps her children, if she only had two children like her mother's locket displayed.

Delainie knew her chances of a locket were slim. Times were hard now for everyone. She heard President Franklin D. Roosevelt on the radio talk about this Depression a lot. Her parents listened every time he spoke to the nation.

Delainie saw them working so hard and worrying. Robert worked as a bookkeeper in town and her mother still took in light sewing and mending for others. Delainie knew some weeks were difficult for her mother since she was the one who had to stretch their food budget. When her mother came home with cabbage and potatoes, but little meat or green vegetables she knew her parents were short on cash that week. This is why she never asked for the four yards of material to make a special evening dress for the Christmas dance.

Delainie set her mind on minding little children for busy mothers as a way for her to earn cash through these tough times since she couldn't ask her parents all the time for material or extra books. Her hobbies were sewing and reading. She used the school and town's libraries often, but once in a blue moon, she wanted her own copy of a book to keep.

The school week ended. Delainie couldn't wait for Saturday to arrive since she had three families to work for and one job was from 7:30 to 11:30 p.m., so that would be extra pay. She stood at the kitchen sink washing the supper dishes after they had finished their meal. She washed and Warren dried. They hurried since they wanted to listen to the humorous, radio broadcast in the parlor with their parents. Warren said, "When you make this fancy dress for the dance, just who are you going to dance with since I'm not dancing with you again? I'm 10 and I want to dance with a girl in my class!"

"I have someone in mind, but I have to talk to Mama and Papa about it first. You don't remember, but Papa said I could start dating when I turned 16. I'll be 16 less than two weeks before the dance. I hope to have a date by then. I have all of November to get Papa's permission and to get a certain boy to ask me. I plan to drop hints and flirt with this classmate."

"You better ask Papa first before a boy asks you! Do I know this boy?"

Delainie chuckled, "Yes, you know the boy. He has been in my class since we were in second grade. He goes to our church, too. You've seen me talking to him."

"That doesn't help me! A lot of boys your age go to our church and a lot of boys talk to you! Just tell me, Sissy. Who is it? Who do you like?"

“Nope, I can’t tell. You’ll tell Papa before I have this worked out.”

“No, I won’t. I promise. I won’t be a bad brother. I’ll keep it a secret. Please, tell me.”

“I’ll tell you once he asks me to the dance and before he comes to call on me that evening if you don’t bother me again about it.”

“Not fair! I want to know now.”

“Sorry, Warren, but I can’t tell you when he hasn’t even asked me yet.”

Saturday arrived. Time dragged through all the jobs, but when Delainie returned home that evening plum tuckered out, she sprawled out across her bed and pulled an old sock from under her mattress. She carefully counted all the quarters, dimes, nickels, pennies, and even a few bills that lay across her cream chenille bedspread. It was the money she earned in October and the first 11 days of November. She had \$19.50, but she had to buy the material on November 15th. There were only three days and she had no other calls from mothers about minding their children. Most people didn’t call for Sunday jobs, so really that only left her with two days to work. Phoebe planned to meet her downtown on November 15th to buy the material. She would bring Delainie’s money in her cash sock. If she could schedule Monday and Tuesday afternoon jobs, she would be fine, but that was highly unlikely.

Delainie approached her father in the parlor before Sunday dinner. “Papa, I am fifty cents short on what I need to have for the material. I hate to ask, but do you have fifty cents to loan me? I promise I will pay you back after I have a few more jobs. I just need it now.”

Robert looked down at his beautiful daughter's incredible blue eyes. "Honey, things are really tight this week. I can spare a quarter if that will help. The rest has to go to your mother's grocery shopping or we don't eat."

"Thank you for the quarter, Papa."

Then, Delainie approached Warren. He had turned into a little hoarder after she'd told him about "Silas Marner." She hoped that he would have a quarter to loan her, too. Warren said, "Okay, I'll give you a quarter, but don't forget that you are going to tell me the name of the boy when he asks you." Delainie kissed Warren on his cheek for being a good brother.

Delainie held Warren's hand so he couldn't get away from her as they stood in front of Brown's Emporium. She strained her neck looking down the sidewalk as she was anxious for her mother to arrive. She and Warren were too early. Delainie didn't want to go into the store with Warren since his energy might cause some breakage and neither she nor her mother had extra money to pay for his carelessness. Finally, she saw her mother. Once inside, Delainie almost drooled with the sales clerk measured and cut the four yards. She carried the brown paper package tightly. Before they left the store, she wandered over to the jewelry case with lockets. She pointed to an oval, sterling silver one with two engraved flowers on it. Phoebe nodded and said, "Yes, it is an attractive piece. It must be your favorite."

Evening after evening, Delainie did her homework after supper first. Then, she sat at her mother's Singer machine and sewed. The darts and seams were no trouble, but on the evening she tried to start on the leg-of-mutton sleeves, she was unsure how to create the seam

of the sleeve and mate it with the side seam of the dress to get the puff at the top of the sleeve. She couldn't understand the pattern directions either.

Delainie wondered downstairs with a sleeve, part of the dress, and pins. She needed guidance from her mother. It didn't take her long to learn how to do a running stitch by hand and then, pull the threads gently to make the material pucker on both sides for a puffy sleeve. Phoebe was proud that she learned so quickly; Delainie was amazed how this technique worked so easily.

Making the dress was easy, but Delainie's challenge was getting her parents to understand how much she wanted that locket by December 4th. She decided not to worry about that part. She needed to concentrate on Michael Stewart and flirting just enough to get him to ask her to the dance.

Fate worked on her side. Their history teacher paired classmates off to do reports requiring several days of quiet research in the school library with the librarian and himself directing them to needed sources. She and Michael were paired off. She felt blessed!

On the second day in the library, Michael asked, "Christmas is around the corner. Are your parents giving you anything special or do they keep presents a secret?"

Delainie giggled in a hushed tone and then, said, "I've wanted an oval, sterling silver locket with two engraved flowers that I've seen at Brown's Emporium and at the local jewelry store since I was 12. I ask for it every year for my December 4th birthday and then, again before Christmas in hopes that I get it, but every year I am disappointed. My fingers are crossed for this birthday."

Michael said, “Sounds like me. I’ve asked my parents for a classical guitar since I was 12, but they haven’t given me one, but I am finally getting one this Christmas. I can’t wait to learn to play it. I’ve taken piano lessons since I was six, so I should catch on quickly.”

“How do you know you are getting it?”

“I saw it in the back of my parents’ closet when they were out one afternoon. I was snooping!”

“Will you play your guitar at school or church, so I can hear you?”

“Just invite me over after Christmas for some cookies and even if I’ve learned one chord, I’ll play a song for you. Or I may play something at the Christmas dance, so you could hear me when we go.”

“What? Who is ‘we;’ do you mean me? Are we going to the dance together? Are you asking me?”

“Of course, I’m asking you. I just had to get my nerve up. Didn’t you get a clue by me eating lunch with you every day for over a week? I know you are the prettiest, sweetest, and smartest girl in school. Why would I ask anyone else?”

Delainie said, “Thank you. I was hoping you’d ask me. Yes, I’ll go with you,” as she blushed a perfect, rosy pink shade.

That evening Delainie told her parents about Michael and his invitation. She reminded them that she would be 16 before the dance. No objections occurred since they’d known the boy and his parents for years.



Delainie's birthday arrived. A beautiful, homemade, yellow cake with white icing and crushed peppermints scattered on the top along with one gift were on the dining room table that evening. The gift was in gold paper with white ribbons. It was a set of pink, white, and clear nail polishes. She thanked her parents before large, delicious slices of cake were served.

Delainie cried quietly in bed since there was no locket.

She began hemming the next day. There was enough leftover material and lace to create a choker to adorn her neck. She had it sewn in less than five minutes except for hemming it on one end and attaching two snaps.

December 16th arrived. All McNeals had baths by lunchtime. The ladies set their hair in curlers, so Warren laughed throughout lunch, but Phoebe gave that stern look again to curb his behavior.

Delainie brushed her hair as she admired her dress in the mirror. Her choker matched the dress even though it was not the effect she wanted. Her heart still longed for the locket. Scents of roses and lily-of-the-valley filled her room as she sprayed Mama's perfume on her wrists. Papa said she had to wait upstairs until Michael arrived.

Michael knocked; Robert answered. Michael, the dark haired, tall boy, just a bit taller than Delainie, looked so grown up in his navy suit, white shirt, and red tie with a brown overcoat and fedora. Robert thought he looked 20 and not 16. Robert asked, "Do you have your father's car for the evening?"

"No, sir. Mom and Dad are out in the car waiting for us."

Michael was awe struck at first glance when Delainie descended the stairs. He stumbled over his words, “Uh, you look, you look so beautiful. Red becomes you.”

Delainie said, “Thank you. You look handsome in your suit.”

“Thank you. It’s new. Mom said my old, church suit was getting threadbare and since I’ve recently grown two inches, the pants looked like they were crawling up my leg.”

Warren chuckled softly.

Phoebe said, “You both look so grown up this evening. Have a good time. We’ll see you there.”

Michael said, “Wait! Delainie, I think you’ll like this better than a corsage. It is a belated birthday gift and an early Christmas gift,” as he handed her a box wrapped in white paper and curled, red ribbons.

Delainie’s hands shook a bit as she removed the ribbons and opened the box lid. In the foyer light’s glow was the shiny, oval, sterling silver locket with two engraved flowers. Michael remembered every word as Delainie described it that day in the library. To hold back tears of joy, she bit her lip.

She said, “It’s the loveliest thing I’ve ever seen. Thank you so much. I just don’t know what to say.”

Phoebe moved Delainie’s hair out of the way, unsnapped the choker, and fastened the locket clasp, and said, “It’s beautiful. It accentuates your dress.”

Later, Delainie and Michael saw her parents and Warren. Michael twirled Delainie around the dance floor most of the evening as he watched her hair flutter in the movement. Everyone enjoyed fruit punch and delicious hors d'oeuvres prepared by the town's ladies.

Each year due to tradition, the dance ended after everyone sang "Silent Night." Michael reached for Delainie's hand and gave it a slight squeeze. He looked at her caringly. Delainie looked at his bright, brown eyes and squeezed his hand in return.

Deep thoughts overcame her as she kept singing — "Michael has become my best friend and he listens to me better than my parents. Mama and Papa married at age 19; we are just 16. I hope at 19 we are still together. I'll ask Michael tomorrow for a photograph. I want to put it in my locket to honor him and his gift. I'll treasure it always and I'll treasure the photograph because of his handsome face. His photograph and my locket will always be close to my heart."

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