

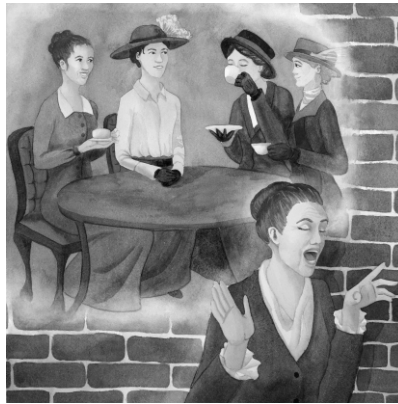
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THE SECRET LIFE

by Elizabeth McDavid Jones

Chapter 11

Tracking Down Mum



The story so far: After searching Bea's room, Susan discovered Bea's secret – she is a suffragist, working for the cause of voting rights for women. But she learned nothing about her mother's disappearance.

Susan spent most of the night worrying about Mum. Finally she drifted off to sleep. The next thing she knew, Helen was jostling her. "Wake up, Susie. Lenny Rubenstein is here. He says there's a phone call for you at the drugstore. Bea's already left."

Lenny's family owned the corner drugstore, and they had the only telephone on the block. Susan was pulling on her clothes. It had to be Mum on the telephone. Susan followed Lenny to the drugstore. She picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Susan? 'Tis your Aunt Blanche. I've been distressed since I got your telegram. I haven't heard from your ma since your dad's funeral. Is she missing then?"

Susan's tongue would barely work. "She told us she was going to visit you on Saturday. We haven't seen her since."

"And you didn't notify the police because you were thinking she was here. I'll be on the first train out this morning."

"No need for that." Susan's voice came out wooden.

"There's a boarder taking care of us."

Susan shivered. Bea taking care of them? Hardly. She'd been lying to them since the day she arrived. But Mum had told the girls Aunt Blanche asked her to visit. That meant that Mum had lied to them, too.

Sick with that realization, Susan dragged out of the drugstore back to the flat. Helen turned as Susan came in. "Who was on the telephone?"

Susan told Helen about her conversation with Aunt Blanche.

"What do we do now?" Helen asked. Susan could see in Helen's eyes the same dread she felt.

"We have to find out where Mum went on Saturday morning—whether she was headed for the train station, or somewhere else. Maybe someone saw her and could tell us which way she was walking. We can ask the one person who knows everything that happens on 26th Street."

"Mrs. Flynn," said Helen.

Mrs. Flynn invited the girls into their flat one floor above the O'Neals'. Another woman stood over a pot bubbling on the stove. "This is my sister Flossie who's visiting from

Boston," said Mrs. Flynn.

Susan tried to be polite. "When did you arrive?"

Mrs. Flynn answered for her sister, "She came in Saturday on the 6 a.m. I was at the station at five to pick her up."

Susan exchanged glances with Helen. If Mum had been telling the truth about going to the train station on Saturday morning, then Mrs. Flynn might have seen her there.

"You didn't happen to run into our mother, did you, Mrs. Flynn? At the station?"

"I must have missed her, lass. Her friends arrived on the 6 a.m. too did they?"

Susan thought she'd heard wrong. "I'm not sure what you mean, Mrs. Flynn."

"Why, the friends we saw her with at Hearn's on Saturday morning." Hearn's was a huge department store that had a café inside. "Your ma was sitting in the café, having tea with her friends. She acted like she barely knew me. What was she doing with those hoity-toity society women, anyway? That one woman with the pug dog dressed in a sweater was feeding it cake, like 'twas a person. I've never seen the like."

A pug dog dressed in a sweater. That had to be the woman Susan had seen Bea with at the post office. Suddenly Susan felt weak in the knees. "We have to be going, Mrs. Flynn," she managed. "We'll come again when we can stay." She hurried Helen out to the stairway landing.

"Susie?" Helen's voice quivered. "Where is Mum? Will she ever come home?"

"Of course Mum will come home." Susan tried to sound confident. Inside, all she felt was uncertainty...and fear.

Then there was a scuffling on one of the landings below—someone coming up the stairs. From the top of the stairwell where the girls sat, there was a clear view straight down to the foyer. They could see someone wearing a hat with huge lavender silk flowers. It was one of Bea's.

"Don't move," Susan mouthed. If they sat very quietly and if Bea didn't happen to glance up, maybe she wouldn't notice them.

Susan needn't have worried. Bea didn't glance right or left, up or down. Susan heard a strangled sound she thought might be a sob.

Then Bea moved out of sight into the twilight of the fourth floor hall. Her footsteps thudded down the hall. A door closed. Bea was inside the flat.

"Did you hear Bea crying?" Helen asked. "I wonder what was the matter with her."

"I don't know." Susan made her voice hard. "But I'm sure now that Bea knows something about Mum's disappearance. And she's not going to tell us what she knows. So I've thought of another way to get the truth from her."

"How?"

"When she comes out of our flat, I'm going to follow her."

Next Week, Chapter 12

Bea's Job