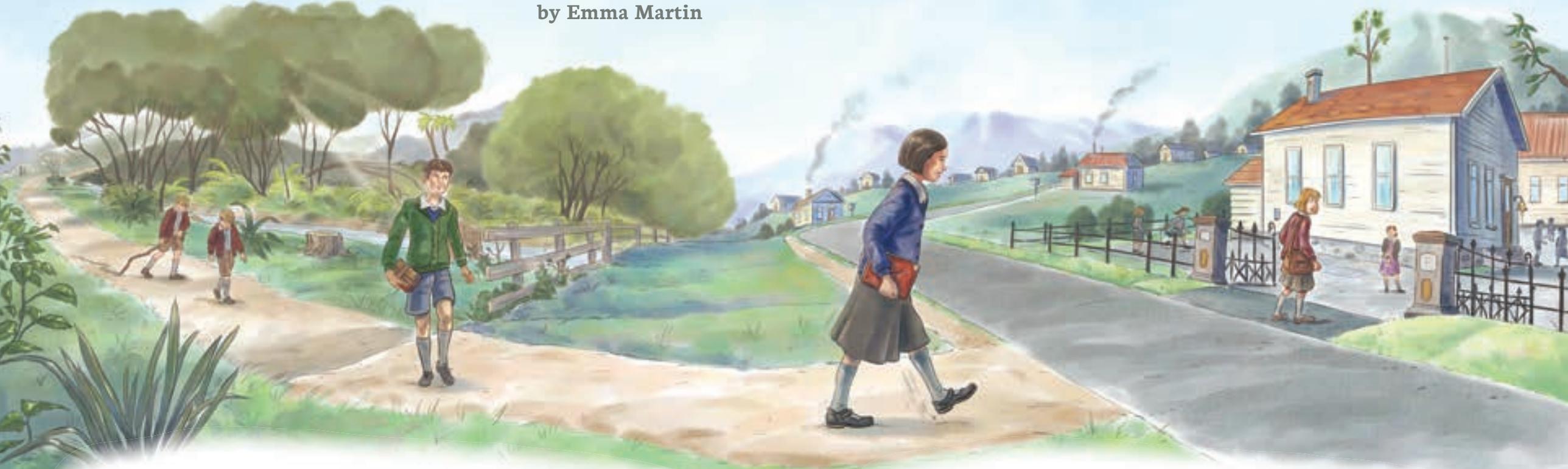


The Leather Satchel

by Emma Martin



Mary was walking through the gully to school, wishing she didn't have to go. Her brothers followed behind, waving sticks to ward off the magpies hiding in the trees. If you weren't careful, they'd swoop down and dive-bomb your head. Squinting in the winter sun, Mary thought she could see one. There, where the leaves were thickest, a flurry of black and white, the blink of a red eye. The bird disappeared back into the shadows, but she knew it was there. Watching. Waiting.

Gladys was a little way ahead. Her leather satchel bumped against her hip as she walked. Mary wished she could have a satchel. But there were five children in their family and only one satchel. Gladys got it for the same reason she got everything – because she was the eldest.

“Hurry up, slow coaches,” Gladys called over her shoulder.

Gladys hated being late. She was the best pupil in the whole school – everyone said so. She was so clever she was going to be a teacher. The magpies wouldn't dare dive-bomb Gladys. Sometimes Mary wished they would.

At the school gate, they separated. Mary spotted Betty and ran to join her as the bell clanged. In class, Mr Saunders was even crankier than usual. He had a cold. Every few minutes, he took a gigantic hanky from his pocket and gave his nose a ferocious blow.

“He sounds like a goose,” Mary whispered to Betty. “Honk, honk!”

Betty giggled, and Mr Saunders looked up. Mary dipped her pen in the ink pot and tried to look busy. But Mr Saunders wasn't fooled. He walked across the classroom and reached for Mary's exercise book. The ink had bled where she had written her name. It looked like a sausage dog walking on its hind legs.

Mr Saunders held the book up between his thumb and forefinger, the way you'd hold something slimy or smelly. “A monkey could write more neatly than this,” he said, and everyone laughed. Mr Saunders put the book back on Mary's desk and sniffed. “It's a pity you don't take after your sister.”

Mary came home from school feeling cranky herself. Gladys took her satchel of books and disappeared to do her homework. The boys ran outside. Mary found her mother doing some mending.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“It’s a dress for Gladys. Aunt Lil dropped it off. It belonged to her neighbour’s daughter. If I fix this seam, it’ll be fine.”

Mary picked the dress up. It was pale yellow with sprigs of flowers. The flowers had probably once been red but were now a dusky pink.

“Can I have it?” she asked.

“You’ll get it when Gladys grows out of it,” her mother said, taking the dress back.

“It’s not fair,” said Mary. “Why can’t I have it now?”

“You know very well why,” her mother said sharply.

Mary did. Gladys was the eldest. By the time the dress was passed down to Mary, the flowers would have faded away. But she could tell by her mother’s face that she should hold her tongue.

To get back in her mother’s good books, Mary peeled the potatoes for dinner. It didn’t take long because there weren’t many. She tried her best to take off the thinnest layer of peel, then she chopped the potatoes into cubes and plopped them into the pot of stew that bubbled on the coal range. At least, her mother said it was stew. It looked more like soup to Mary.

Gladys came in while she was stirring. “I can do that if you want,” she said. But Mary just scowled at her.



That night, Mary’s father was late home. He sat down at the dinner table, looking wearier than ever. He used to be a bookbinder but had lost his job the previous winter. He said it was because of the Depression. No one wanted to buy books when they barely had enough money for food. Now he dug rock from the hills. He came home covered in dust, even his eyelashes. Sometimes at night, Mary heard him trying to cough that dust up from his lungs.

They had just started eating when there was a knock at the door. Aunt Lil let herself in. Her face was so red she looked as if she might burst. She couldn’t wait to tell them. There was a job going at the Grimshaws’. They wanted a hard-working girl to clean and cook for them. “I came here as fast as I could,” Aunt Lil said. “If Gladys is there at six o’clock tomorrow morning, the job’s hers.”

Gladys dropped her fork on her plate with a terrible clatter, making Mary jump. Everyone stared at Aunt Lil.



“Mine?” cried Gladys. “But I can’t go to work. I’ve got school.” She turned to her parents. “Mother? Father? Tell her!”

Mary’s parents looked at each other but didn’t say anything.

Gladys stood up and ran from the room. They all heard the bedroom door slam.

Surely their parents wouldn’t make Gladys leave school, thought Mary. If she did, she would never be a teacher! Mary remembered how she and Gladys used to play in the shed in their garden. She hadn’t thought about that for years. They had called it their schoolroom. They had an old-fashioned slate and a cloth to clean it. Gladys taught Mary to write her name on that slate. Mary remembered how patient she was, how she had a way of helping that didn’t make you feel stupid.

After dinner, Mary dried the dishes while her mother washed. Clouds must have been gathering in the night sky because as she watched, the stars slowly disappeared. “Gladys won’t really have to go to the Grimshaws’, will she?” Mary finally asked.

Her mother was quiet for a moment. Then she sighed. “We need the money,” she said. “And Gladys is the eldest.”

When Mary went to their room, Gladys was already in bed. Her eyes were shut tight – perhaps too tight. Mary climbed into bed and pulled the blanket up under her chin. There was only a narrow gap between their beds. Usually that gap was a battleground of pointy elbows and kicking feet. But tonight there was an invisible wall between them. Gladys didn’t make a sound, but Mary was sure she was awake.

Mary knew it wasn’t Gladys’s fault that she was good at school. It wasn’t Gladys’s fault that Mr Saunders was horrid. It wasn’t Gladys’s fault that the dress fitted her best. It certainly wasn’t Gladys’s fault that there was never enough money. Yet Gladys was the one who would have to pay. Mary thought of the magpie in the tree that morning – that sharp beak, those calculating eyes. Keep back, she wanted to tell it now. Stay away from my sister.

“Gladys?” she whispered.

But Gladys didn’t reply. And when Mary woke the next morning, Gladys had gone, leaving her school books and leather satchel behind.

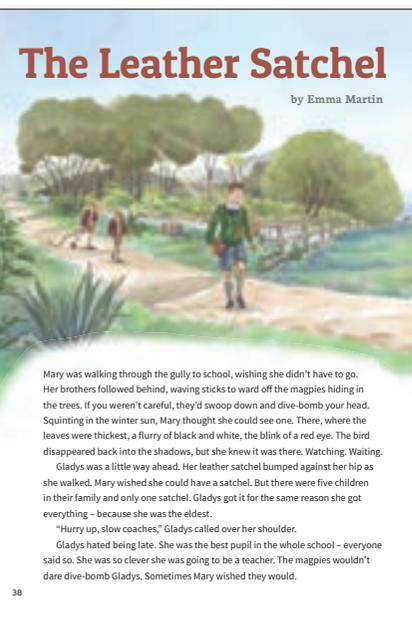
illustrations by Scott Pearson



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