

*Kathy Nickerson*

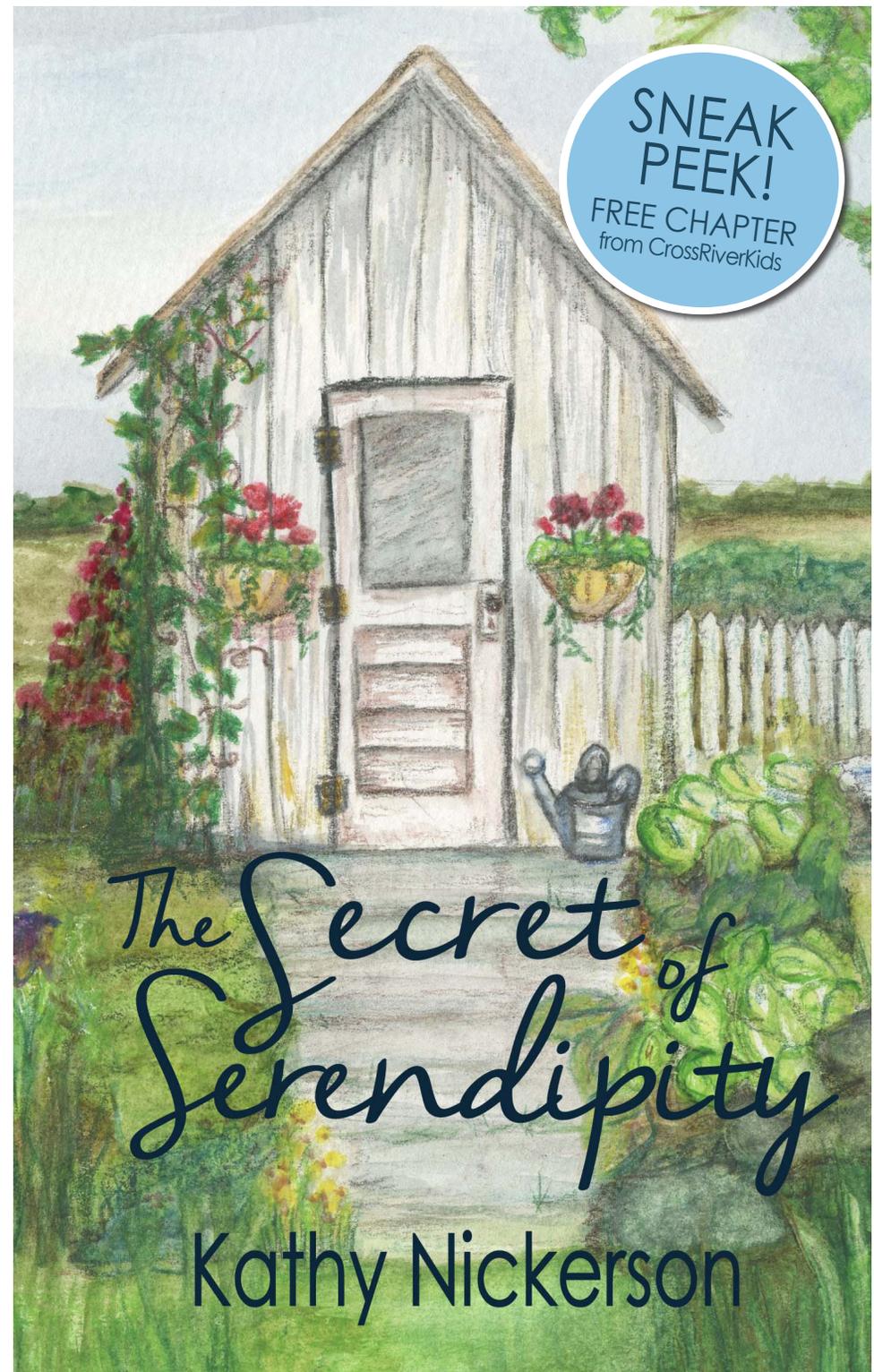
I had tucked myself in while my parents finished hauling the last of the boxes into the house.

I will tell them, though. I should tell them. Unless it gets Mrs. Kirk in trouble somehow. I don't want to do that either.

The new comforter started to feel heavy and hot, so I shoved it to the foot of the bed. My pillow started to feel lumpy. Or maybe flat. Something was wrong with it, anyway. I flopped from side to side trying to find a place that felt comfortable.

Then the noises started. The first one sounded like a hundred crickets chirping away on microphones. Tree frogs. My dad had described their song this way, but I hadn't expected them to be so loud. Then something hooted in the tree outside my window, and something else howled from the woods behind the house. Before long, dogs were barking in the distance from every direction.

I slammed the flat pillow over my head and tried to block out the sounds of country life. The last thing I thought before I finally fell asleep was that I had never kept anything from my mother. Nothing except a Christmas secret, and that only lasted a few weeks.



CrossRiverKids

came over. I've never known why they did that. It must have been an error on somebody's part.

"But they kept right on being preachers. Every father, uncle, brother, and son for three generations. When my Elliot decided to be a teacher instead, it nearly killed his poor mother. She moaned and cried and wondered why they'd ever left the dear old Highlands if she was going to see a son fall away like this. She got over it eventually, when she needed a bedroom on the ground floor and we converted the parlor for her."

Mrs. Kirk took a deep breath and shook her head. "I hate that," she said. "I hate it when I find myself going on about the past like some old woman."

She stood up with some effort and shuffled toward the opposite wall. "Let's talk about real life instead." She leaned near the window of the shed. "You point out your family and tell me about them. I'll give you all the gossip on the strangers in your yard."

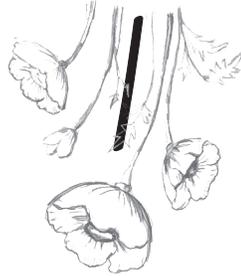
We passed a pleasant afternoon doing exactly that. When the shadows started getting long on the grass, and the empty moving truck tumbled away down the hill, I said, "Shouldn't I ask my dad to drive you back now?"

"No. I think not," Mrs. Kirk considered the possibilities for a moment. "If they know where I've been, they'll keep a closer eye on me. If I can make my way down the hill into town, I can just wander into Grundy's store and tell him I've been for a little walk. I'll just say I got tired out and would he please call someone from the home to come and get me." She tucked her handkerchief back into her sleeve, gave me a nod, and stepped out the door much more quickly than she had come in.

I lay awake in my new room a long time that night. It was strange and dark, but the nosy neighbors had put my bed together and made it up with my favorite sheets and my new comforter. All around the room were the boxes marked "Karas Things," and tomorrow I would start unpacking. It might be fun to arrange things in this funny old room with its corners and crooks.

Just when I was about to fall asleep, I had the sudden thought that Mrs. Kirk might have slept in this very room. Cool. I've got to tell my mom about that.

The thought jolted me awake. Did Mrs. Kirk ask me not to tell my mother? Not exactly. It had never been said out loud, but it seemed to have been understood. Mrs. Kirk certainly hadn't wanted anyone to know she was here today. I would normally tell my parents this kind of thing at the dinner table or at bedtime after they tucked me in. But nobody sat down for dinner tonight, and



The moving truck chugged up our hill at two in the afternoon, only three hours after its expected time of arrival. Right behind the truck came two pickups, three minivans, and five assorted cars. None of those were expected. The entire parade stopped in the circle drive and paused for a second with engines rumbling. Then doors flew open, people spilled out, and everyone started talking at once.

I stared at the people swarming across the yard and spoke to my dad without taking my eyes off the mob.

"Who are these people?"

"Neighbors." My dad stepped forward with a smile and stuck out his hand to a man wearing a red baseball cap. The man slapped Dad on the back, and the two of them walked toward the house like old friends.

How did they know we were coming?

Just then a large lady with three strands of pearls dancing on her chest came rushing toward me and pushed a sack into my arms. "You must be Karen," she said, "the middle one. A little underweight aren't you, dear? Well, Mrs. Jones will fatten you up once school starts. Here. I brought a pie. That should get you started. Been living on junk food in that city I expect."

Here the Pie Lady stopped long enough to take a breath, and I stepped back. "Thanks for the pie. I'll take it in."

I didn't correct the lady about my name. Kara Jane Bryant seems like a normal name to me, but every time we move, people try to put extra letters on the end. Sometimes it seems terribly important that a person get it right. Like Lexi. I spelled it out for her the day we met. But I never bothered correcting people. For the next two hours, people streamed across the porch with food or advice or both. I couldn't figure out where they came from. Certainly they didn't

Mrs. Kirk pointed toward the yard. "They want to be friendly, I suppose. But in a town this size, new people are hot stuff. So, mostly, they are just nosy."

"Is that why you came?"

Mrs. Kirk laughed. "No. But it would have been if I'd known."

She pointed with her handkerchief toward the curving driveway. "I fell last winter taking a letter to the mailbox. The roads were icy, so no one came by for a few hours. Actually, I prayed no one would come up the hill, because I didn't want to lose my dignity. I had no idea it was broken."

"Your dignity?"

"And my hip."

"The mailman finally came along, and he called the ambulance. After I recuperated in the hospital, my children decided I would be better off in a nursing home. Safer. They were right at first. I couldn't get around and take care of myself. Might have burned the place down if I had stayed." She paused for a little while again and stared out the window. Then she said, "Now, with summer coming, I just got lonely for the place. I absolutely had to escape for a few hours. At first, I just wanted to take a little walk. But pretty soon I found myself at the foot of this hill, and I thought it would be a challenge to see if I could climb it. Of course, I suppose I had coming here in my mind all along."

"So, you didn't know we were coming? To live in your house?"

"No. Jonathan, my son, mentioned he might try to find someone to live in the house and keep it up. I haven't heard from him just recently. He's very busy with his work. Catherine, my daughter, thought we should sell. But I said, 'No! Lease it if you must, but I'll not sell. You children were born here.'"

She said the last part as if that made all the difference.

"Have you lived here always, then?"

"Oh, no," Mrs. Kirk said. "My husband's people came from Scotland. They've only lived here for three generations. And I only came sixty years ago."

I nodded as if that made sense. I couldn't remember living anywhere more than two years at a time.

"My husband's folks were churchmen, you see," Mrs. Kirk said. "Kerk. That's the Scottish word for church, but they changed the spelling when they

all live in those few houses in town. My parents seemed to be enjoying the craziness. My little brother, Will, had climbed a tree somewhere, and my sister, Amy, handled the attention like royalty. Eventually, I couldn't take anymore. I jumped over the porch railing and walked around to the back of the house.

I wandered around the edge of the yard, poking at an old flower garden growing mostly weeds. Then I spotted a small building close to the woods. It looked like the gardening shed behind Lexi's house, only it wasn't brick, and it kind of leaned to one side.

A tall tree shaded it and it looked like a good place to avoid the crowd. I reached into my jacket pocket for *Anne of Green Gables* and checked over my shoulder to make sure I hadn't been spotted.

The door creaked when I opened it, and dust flew into my face. But nothing scary flew out. A window on one side let in enough light that I could see several old wooden boxes stacked along the wall. I stepped inside and kicked the first box. I wanted to make enough noise to scare away anything that might be living in the shadows. Nothing moved but dust.

I scooted the boxes around to make a place where I could sit and prop up my legs. Then I opened my book, leaned back, and prepared to forget the tragedy of my life.

A cobweb dangling from my foot distracted me, though. I reached down to swat it off, and that's when I saw the carving on the box. Vines and flowers around a group of letters. I brushed the dirt away and read the word out loud. "Ser-en-dip-ity."

"Do you know what it means?"

The voice came from the open window, and it scared me so badly I dropped *Anne*. I turned around and saw a huge bird's nest of white hair on top of a face full of wrinkles. The old woman shuffled forward a few steps. "Open the door!"

I obeyed, but not quickly.

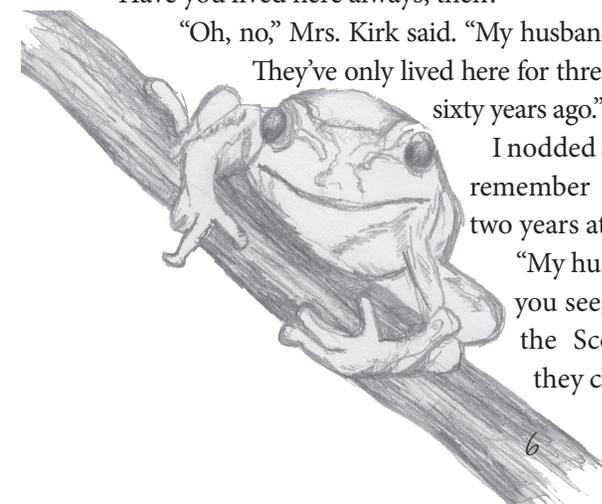
"Hurry up! Open it wider before someone catches me."

I pushed hard on the door. It swung open revealing a tiny lady in a blue flowered dress with a white collar. She wore white running shoes and leaned on a walker like the ones hospitals use.

"What do you mean about someone catching you?" I asked.

"Never mind. Shut the door."

I did. Then I watched while the woman hobbled over to the corner and eased down on a box. She sighed and wiped her forehead with a little square of cloth that had been tucked into the edge of her sleeve.



I realized I was starting when the woman said, "It's called a handkerchief. Ladies used them back in the days before the world became disposable. I expect you are more familiar with the paper tissues known generically as Kleenex. Although Kleenex is the brand name and should always be capitalized when one is writing it out. Aspirin was originally a brand name, too, but we have completely nullified its standing by using it in the generic for so many years. I'm sure the same will happen to Tylenol eventually."

I wanted to tell her I know what a handkerchief is because my dad wears one with his good suit every Sunday. His don't have flowers in the corner or lace around the edges. But she kept talking before I could add anything to the conversation.

"I have a whole collection," the woman said. "We used to match them to our dress, right along with our hats and our gloves and our slippers." She stuck one foot up and looked at her shoes. "We don't do things quite the same anymore." After a moment of silence, the woman turned toward the box with the carving. She ran her hand over the word, "Seren dipity. My tongue has always liked the word. Do you understand it?"

I decided to sit on the dusty floor and watch for a moment to excuse myself. "No, I guess I don't." The woman nodded. "Few do." She sat still so long I thought she had fallen asleep. She pulled up her shoulders and took a breath. "Well," she said, "to put it briefly, it is rather a happy accident. Not the accident itself, mind you. Seren dipity is the ability to have a happy accident."

I waved a fly away from my nose. "I don't get it." Again, the old woman nodded as if she knew perfectly well no one ever got it. "The word comes originally from an Austrian fairy tale entitled *The Three Princes of Seren dipity*. These fellows set out on a long journey in pursuit of a specific thing. I don't remember what it was just now. But along the way, in the worst of circumstances, they kept making marvelous discoveries. Completely by accident."

"Oh." It still didn't make much sense, but I didn't want to ask any more questions. The visitor seemed intent on explaining, though. "So, you see, when one sets out to do a certain thing, as I have done today, and one happens upon something unexpected, such as finding you in this shed, that is serendipity." She looked quite satisfied with herself. "I have it, you see."

I thought about that. Being discovered this afternoon was not such a happy accident on my side of things. "And who, exactly, are you?" the woman asked. I was so surprised to meet someone who didn't already know my name, age, and grade point average that I answered right away. "I'm Kara Jane Bryant. I live here."

"Karen? And you live here?" "No, not Karen. Just Kara. Kara Jane Bryant. And I will live here just as soon as the unpacking is done. Are you a neighbor?" The old woman took time to dab her forehead. Then she looked up with a sparkle in her eyes. "No, I'm Mrs. Kirk."

"Mrs. Kirk? The Kirk who owns this house? I thought you were dead." I wanted to take the words back as soon as I spoke, but Mrs. Kirk only laughed. "Only halfway," she said, "or so they tell me. Frankly, I feel quite alive now that I've escaped."

"Escaped from where?" I had sudden visions of a secret dungeon below the house and started building a marvelous plot in my imagination. Mrs. Kirk broke the spell. "From Sunny View Convalescent Home." She made it sound something like a dungeon. "But it isn't sunny, and it isn't home, and now I've escaped." She sighed and leaned back against the wall.

The strange guest in the garden shed didn't seem inclined to talk anymore. So I leaned back too, and watched the bustle of people in the yard. I thought how strange this would be if I dared to write Lexi about it.

*Dear Lexi,*

*We arrived at Kirk Place today and received a warm welcome from the community. In fact, the entire town is here right now carrying our boxes and bags into the house.*

"Seems kind of nosy, doesn't it?"

I jumped at the sound of Mrs. Kirk's voice.

"It seems strange. All those people bringing pies and cakes. When we moved into our apartment last year, nobody even noticed. We jugged our own boxes up the stairs, and the movers carried the furniture. We didn't even meet any neighbors until the next month when the guy in 4-B got our phone bill by mistake."