

## HOPE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

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*This story was written to celebrate Suffrage 125 2018 (125 years since woman got the vote in New Zealand). This story is inspired by my Great, Great, Great Grandmother Kate Mortenson, one of the 30,000 people to sign the petition for woman's rights.*

*I have taken some 'artistic license' throughout the story such as Kate and her daughter's physical appearance and their involvement in collecting signatures. Their ages have also been altered slightly.*

Catherine sat, ridged, scowling at the sketch<sup>1</sup> in the newspaper on woman's suffrage. Anger bubbled inside her. This was completely unfair. What self-respecting person would create such a disgraceful sketch?

"What are you reading?" Evelyn asked, materialising behind her.

"Nothing." Her tone was harsher than she meant it, but at that moment she didn't care. The boys in her class had bullied her because she argued with them about women getting the vote; then she'd seen this despicable cartoon, and now her annoying little sister was sticking her nose in.

"It doesn't look like nothing," Evelyn continued, trying to read the newspaper over Catherine's shoulder.

"You are endangering your health," Catherine warned, her green eyes fixed on the wall.

"How?"

Catherine shot out a bony hand to grab Evelyn but she'd already run out of the room.

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<sup>1</sup> Cartoon against women's suffrage, URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/anti-womens-suffrage-cartoon>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 23-Dec-2013

A knock on the door echoed through the house. Who was that? Catherine crept into the carpeted hallway, brushing her straggly red hair out of her eyes.

Her mother opened the door to reveal a middle-aged woman in a white dress holding a stack of papers. "Hello Mrs Mortenson, would you like to sign the petition for woman's right to vote?"

"Oh, yes I would love to!" her mother exclaimed, taking one of the slips of paper and writing her name and where they lived - Western Spit, Napier.

"Thank you, every signature makes a difference."

"I would love to help any way I can," replied her mother.

"Come to the hall, we are having a meeting there tomorrow at 9:00pm and we need more people."

"I'll be there," her mother said, closing the door.

"Mother, that's great!" Catherine burst out in excitement, thrilled that the petition was really happening and they were part of it.

Her mother turned with shining eyes towards her, a wide smile lighting up her face. "This is an amazing chance to have our voice heard and tell Richard Seddon what we think.

Her father nodded from the door to the kitchen. "Just be careful, not everyone is for this."

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Catherine lay awake, waiting for her mother to return. Evelyn was asleep in the bed across from her.

After what seemed like hours, the door creaked open. She carefully disentangled herself from her covers and padded down the hallway.

Her mother was sitting at the wooden dining table with a stack of papers.

"What are those?"

She looked up, smiling. "I thought you would be awake. These are the papers we ask people to sign for the petition. Tomorrow I will go around houses asking people for their signatures."

"Can I help you?" She wanted to prove to the boys in her class that woman should have the right to vote.

Her mother nodded slowly. "Yes, I think that would be a good idea."

Catherine's eyes glittered with excitement.

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Catherine clutched the papers, following her mother towards the long row of houses.

The sun glistened off her white dress, the crisp smell of morning fresh in her nose as they walked down the dirt path.

Her mother knocked on the first door at the head of the row of houses.

A young woman appeared at the door in a long, brown dress. "How can I help you?" she asked, noticing the pen and paper.

"Would you like to sign the petition for woman's right to vote?" Catherine asked, her stomach clenching as it always did when she spoke to someone she didn't know.

The woman's face turned flustered. "Oh, I would like to..." she cast a fearful look inside. "But no, I-I'm sorry." She closed the door.

Catherine scowled, why wouldn't she sign it?

Her mother sighed. "Let's keep going."

They knocked on the door of the next house. Catherine bit her lip, not sure of the reaction they would get.

A young boy came to the door wearing a cap. He turned back inside. "Mother, someone's here to see you!"

A woman hurried to the door.

"Would you like to sign the petition for woman's right to vote?" her mother asked.

“Oh, yes! I am so glad this is finally happening! We’ll show that Henry Fish!” The woman took the pen Catherine offered, writing her signature and address very precisely and slowly.

“Thank you.”

The next woman eyed them first with suspicion then with incredulous disbelief as they explained about the petition.

“Um, would you like to sign it?”

“No.” The woman slammed the door, storming down the hall, muttering.

Her mother turned, shocked and hurt.

Catherine placed her hand on her mother’s arm, glaring at the door. She raised a hand to knock again but her mother pulled her away before she could give this woman a piece of her mind.

Forty doors later, they had twenty-five signatures. They strolled down the path to their house, smiles on their faces.

“That went really well,” her mother said.

Catherine nodded, the look on some of the woman’s faces as they said ‘no’ stuck in her mind. Why wouldn’t they sign it? Were they scared?

“Are you ok?” her mother asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I was just thinking about the woman who didn’t sign the petition,” Catherine said hesitantly.

Her mother nodded. “It is sad, it can take a lot of courage to sign a petition like this and not everyone is willing to do it. But twenty-five did sign. Now let’s have dinner.”

Catherine followed her mother into the house, a glimmer of hope igniting inside her.

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Catherine picked up the copy of the Daily Telegraph lying on the doorstep. Taking it inside she glanced at the front page half-heartedly, then did a double take.

## **“WOMAN’S SUFFRAGE**

**The battle has been fought and won, fought determinedly and stubbornly, and the woman of New Zealand who have clamoured for political equality with the other sex can now congratulate themselves.<sup>2</sup>”**

Catherine inhaled sharply. “Mother!”

Her mother ran into the kitchen. “What is it?”

She pointed wordlessly at the announcement, a wave of overpowering excitement crashing over her.

Her mother stared at the paper then let out a shout of joy. She engulfed Catherine in a hug. “Evelyn, the vote passed!”

Evelyn ran into the room, her eyes shining.

“We did it!” Catherine exclaimed. “Despite his antics, old Seddon lost!”

Her mother hugged her and Evelyn. “Now when you are older, you can vote and have your voice heard!”

Catherine grinned, a balloon of happiness welling up inside her.

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Catherine followed her mother to the polling booth.

“This is so exciting!” she said, delighted at the amount of woman who had turned up to vote. She recognised some of the women there that hadn’t wanted to sign. The sun sparkled off watches and danced over dresses, the sky was a perfect blue.

Her mother took a deep breath, glanced at her, then strode into the polling booth.

Catherine hopped from foot to foot, waiting for her.

Her mother emerged from the booth. Grinning, she moved to her daughter, hugging her tightly. “Finally, we can make a difference.”

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<sup>2</sup> Women’s Suffrage, Daily Telegraph, 8 September 1893