

## THE TWELVE MONTHS

By Delia Sherman

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LIZ WALLACH was a pretty good kid. She mostly did her homework on time and pretty much got along with her father and was usually polite to his girlfriends. She wasn't perfect, by any means. She had been known to lie about brushing her teeth and she couldn't for the life of her tell her left from her right. But for a ten-year-old, she wasn't bad.

Liz lived with her father in a big apartment on the Upper West Side of New York City. Sometimes she went to stay with her mother in San Francisco or her grandmother in Cape Cod. She liked school. Things were good.

Then Beth Dodson came into her life.

Beth Dodson was the daughter of one of Dad's girlfriends. When the girlfriend became Liz's stepmother, Liz and Beth became stepsisters. Liz was ready to be happy about this. She'd always wanted a sister, and she kind of liked it that their real names were the same: Elizabeth.

But Beth had been perfectly happy being an only child, and she didn't like it at all that they had the same name. That was only one of the things she didn't like. She didn't like school and she didn't like Chinese food and she didn't like New York. It was big and noisy and dirty and there were too many people living in it.

"Maybe she's shy," said Liz's father hopefully. "Maybe she'll get over it."

But Beth had no intention of getting over hating New York, or anything else. She whined constantly: about having to walk three blocks to the bus stop, about having ballet lessons at Mme Demipointe's Ecole de Danse.

She fought with her mother and wouldn't speak to Liz or her stepfather, except to say that she wished she were still living in New Rochelle with her Daddy and playing soccer on Wednesday afternoons.

Things weren't so good any more.

It was November, just before Thanksgiving vacation, when Liz got a special history assignment. She had to go to the American Wing at Metropolitan Museum of Art and look at the furniture and write a paper about it.

Liz's stepmother said, "I can take you while Beth's in ballet class. You'll have to be quick, though. Mme Demipointe hates to be kept waiting."

By the time Liz and her stepmother dropped Beth off at Mme Demipointe's and got to the museum, it was about 3:00 pm. Liz's stepmother paid for two admissions, went to the restaurant, sat down at a little round table, and took a magazine out of her bag.

"Aren't you coming with me?" Liz asked.

"It's your assignment," said her stepmother. "It's better if you do it yourself. And remember, we have to be at Madame's by 4:30."

"But I don't know where..."

"I don't either," said her stepmother. "Ask."

By the time Liz found a guard who wasn't busy with someone else, ten minutes of her hour were gone. The she turned left instead of right in the Medieval Treasury, and got lost, and asked another guard and got lost again. Precious minutes ticked away as she walked through rooms of paintings and statues.

Finally, at 3:45, she walked up a flight of stairs and through a glass door, and found herself in a small, dark room with nothing in it but a big, bright picture.

Wherever she was, it wasn't the American Wing.

Liz wasn't much of a cryer as a general rule, but this was too much. Even if she started back now and didn't get lost once, she'd be late, and her stepmother would be madder than a taxi-driver in a traffic jam and her assignment still wouldn't be done.

"I must be just about the unluckiest person in the world," she wailed.

"Whatsa matter, kid?"

The voice was friendly, with a heavy Bronx accent. Liz wiped her face on her sleeve and looked around for a guard, but she was alone.

The painting caught her eye.

It showed the statue of Atlas at Rockefeller Center with twelve people standing and sitting around it. They were all ages from a very little girl in a snowsuit with cat ears to an old man in a wheelchair, and all the races Liz had ever heard of. They were

wearing all kinds of different clothes, too, from a little Hispanic boy in snow boots and a ski jacket to a young white guy in Bermuda shorts and a pretty Black woman in a sundress, who opened her painted lips and said, "What it is, honey? Maybe we can help."

Liz's heart started to beat very fast. She was startled, but not frightened. She'd read lots of books in which things like this happened. "I'm lost," she said.

"We also," said a Pakistani boy in baggy jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. "But you have found us."

Liz thought about this. "Would you like me to tell the guard you're here?"

The old man in the wheelchair laughed. He was pale and thin as a china cup, but his laugh was warm and strong. "No. Thank you. We prefer to be found by chance."

"Oh," said Liz, and glanced at her watch. 3:40. She'd thought it was later.

"What time of year is it?" The question came from an Asian girl about Liz's age, dressed in a red slicker and boots and flowered mittens.

"November," said Liz.

"I hate November," said the girl, and stuck out her tongue at an old Native-America woman leaning on a cane.

"It's not so bad," said Liz. "There's Thanksgiving and hot apple cider, and we get to go to Grandma's. And then it's almost December, and that means Christmas and I can go sledding in Central Park with Dad." She remembered Beth and sighed. "If he still wants to."

"January, though," remarked a middle-aged Latino man in an embroidered short-sleeved shirt. "January is very terrible."

"And February, and March," added a skinny, unshaven man dressed in layers and layers of brown jackets.

"I kind of like them," Liz said. "I like getting cold and wet and then coming in and getting warm and looking at the lights out the window. It's easier to go to school in winter, too. You don't want to be outdoors so much, unless it's snowing, of course."

"Of course," said a woman with a prayer shawl around her shoulders. "But April, you know what they say about April, nu? April is the cruelest month, that's

what they say."

"April showers bring May flowers," said Liz. "Besides, I like mud and the way it smells."

"Even in Central Park?" asked a motherly Hispanic woman.

"Especially in Central Park."

"And the summer?" asked a teenage girl with her hair in a million little braids and flowers painted on her nails.

"Oh, summer is neat," said Liz. "May and June can be hard because I want to be outside all the time and there's still school, but it smells so good and the days are getting longer and there's summer vacation coming and we go to Cape Cod, and that's the best."

"So, you must hate the fall," said a little Black boy in a very big parka.

"Not really," said Liz. "I miss my friends, and there's my birthday in October, and I love the leaves turning all red and gold and--" she stopped suddenly. "Listen. This is way cool, but I'm really late and my stepmother is going to kill me. I really have to go."

"I think we can take care of that for you," said the young guy in shorts. "Can't we, September?"

The woman smoothed her prayer shawl. "I think we should, June. And the history assignment as well." She caught sight of Liz's face and laughed kindly. "We can't do it for you--that wouldn't be kosher. But we can give you the time to do it in. And directions to the American Wing."

"Bye-bye," said the little girl in the snowsuit. "Good luck."

And they were gone.

Oh, there was still a painting on the wall, but it was just a big canvas with bright blobs on it that only looked like people if you stood back and squinted hard. The plaque on the wall beside it said, "The Twelve Months of Manhattan, Peter Minuit. Undated."

Liz looked at her watch. It was 3:05 pm. She had 55 minutes before her stepmother would be looking for her. She ran straight to the American Wing without taking one wrong turn, and looked at the furniture and took notes for her paper until her watch said 3:50, when she walked back to the restaurant without even having to

ask for directions. It was magical.

As Liz came up to her stepmother's table, she looked at her watch. "4:00 exactly," she said, surprised. "Lucky for you you made it."

Outside, it was raining, a cold, thick November rain. There wasn't a taxi to be seen, and lots of people waiting.

"We're going to be hours late picking Beth up," Liz's stepmother moaned.

Just then, a taxi pulled up right in front of Liz. The door opened, the passenger got out, and Liz's stepmother nipped right in, with Liz on her heels. Liz's stepmother told the taxi where they were going and sat back as the traffic miraculously cleared to let them through. "What a piece of luck!" she exclaimed.

Liz hung onto her notebook and grinned.

From that moment on, things got much, much better.

Not only did taxis stop whenever Liz needed one, she always made it to the bus stop just when the bus was pulling up to it. Her dad gave her a sled for Christmas, and her stepmother liked the scarf Liz knitted for her. And she never, ever lost a card game. Old Maid, Go Fish, War, anything where luck counted, Liz just couldn't lose.

"Not again!" her stepmother groaned as Liz stripped her of her hoarded sixes and triumphantly laid down all her own cards.

"Look at the bright side, dear," said her father. "If we need money, we can just send her to buy a lottery ticket."

"I'm only ten," Liz objected. "They wouldn't sell me one."

Beth's mother glanced at Beth, who was looking as gloomy as the East River in the rain. "I'm tired of cards," she said.

"Monopoly!" said Beth's stepfather cheerfully, and got out the board. "I'll take the top hat. I never lose a game when I have the top hat."

He lost this game, though. Liz won it, mostly because she landed on Boardwalk, Park Place, and all the Railroads her first time around the board.

"Lucky stiff," her father said.

"Too lucky," Beth muttered, and went off to think about it. Ever since that trip to the museum in November, Liz had been luckier than any human being had a right to be. Something had to have happened, something magic. It wasn't fair. Nice things were always happening to Liz, and only bad things ever happened to her.

Later, Beth challenged Liz to a game of Paper, Scissors, Stone. Unable to think of a reason not to, Liz agreed. Seven times, the stepsisters chanted, "One, Two, Three, Go." Seven times Liz won.

"That's not luck, that's magic," Beth said accusingly. "You have to tell me what happened. I want to be lucky, too."

Liz thought about lying, but it just didn't seem right. Beth wouldn't find the Months of Manhattan unless they wanted her to. And if she did find them, Liz was sure they'd be able to handle one eleven-year-old girl, even one as whiny and annoying as Beth.

So she told her stepsister all about getting really lost, and stumbling onto a room with a magic picture in it. She would have told her all about the Months, but Beth didn't want to hear about it.

"I'm not a total idiot," she said. "If you tell me everything, it'll ruin the magic, right? I hate you, Liz Wallach."

Next day, Beth announced at dinner that her history teacher had given her the now-famous American Wing furniture assignment. It was due Monday.

"But the museum's a madhouse on weekends," her mother objected.

"We can make a family outing of it," said her stepfather. "It'll be fun."

Beth pouted. "I want to do it by myself."

Her stepfather said, "Good for you, Bethy. We'll turn you into a New Yorker yet. I tell you what. We'll all go to the museum, and you can go to the American Wing and the rest of us will look at armor or something and we'll all meet in the restaurant for lunch."

And that was what they did. Liz, her dad, and Beth's mother went off one way, and Beth went off in another. She'd never liked going to the museum, so it wasn't very long before she was as lost and frightened as the most demanding magic would wish. The museum was, as her mother had predicted, a madhouse. Everywhere she turned, people bumped into her and glared at her. Thinking of nothing but finding somewhere quiet, she ran up a back stair and through a glass door and found herself in a small, dark room with a nothing in it but large, bright picture.

In her fear, Beth had almost forgotten what had brought her to the museum. Almost, but not quite. She stared at the picture to see if it looked magic. It didn't.

What could be magic about a bunch of street people sitting around a stupid statue?

"It was a dumb idea anyway," she said aloud. "Everyone knows there's no such thing as magic."

"Who says?"

Beth jumped. One of the people in the painting, a dark-brown boy about her age in huge, baggy jeans, was scowling at her.

Beth said, "Remember my stepsister, Liz? She was here in November. You made her lucky."

Next to a guy in Bermuda shorts was a Black girl with long nails and lots of braids. "November," she said. "I know November. Is it still winter, out there in the world?"

Beth shook her head scornfully. "You guys are supposed to be magic, right? And you don't even know what month it is? It's December, for your information, and it's cold and wet and I hate it."

"What about Christmas, and the snow?" asked the young guy in shorts.

"It doesn't snow in New York, not a real snow like at home. It just turns into slush and puddles that get into your boots. And Christmas isn't the same without Daddy. I hate winter here, every bit of it."

"And Spring?" asked an old bum wearing about a million raggedy jackets.

"It never gets warm until June, and then it gets hot and muggy, and you can smell the garbage and you never feel clean. And then it gets cold again, just like that, and starts raining again, and there aren't even any pretty leaves to look at, like there are at home. I hate it. I hate it all."

The Months exchanged silent looks.

"Well," said the woman in the prayer shawl. "We certainly know where you stand."

Her voice was angry, in a cool sort of way. Beth scowled. "You asked," she whined. "That's how I feel. I can't help it if you don't like it. Now you'll probably do something awful to me. It's not fair."

"Don't you worry, honey," said an Black woman in a sundress. "We're going to give you exactly what you need. And I don't want to hear any of your sass, April."

The baggy-jeans boy shrugged and grinned.

The old man in the wheelchair lifted a hand like a white claw and said, "The luck you have asked for is yours. Now go."

Beth felt a giant hand shove her out of the little room. It kept on shoving her, right and left through the Saturday crowds until she was, if possible, even more lost than she had been before. And then it left her, in the furthest corner of European Decorative Arts, in a room full of cloudy glass cups.

By the time Beth had found her way back to the restaurant, she was nearly an hour late. Her mother and stepfather, who had been wondering if she'd been kidnapped, were pretty mad when she showed up safe and sound. When they found out that she didn't have any notes on American furniture, they were even madder. And when she unluckily let slip that she didn't really have a paper due Monday, they were mad enough to fight all the lions in the Bronx Zoo and win.

The only person who wasn't mad at Beth was Liz. At first, it was because she thought that having major bad luck served Beth right. But before long, she started to feel sorry for her. Anyone would.

Beth couldn't walk down the street without stepping in doggy doo or chewing gum. Streetlights turned red when she came to the corner, and buses pulled away just as she got to the stop. When it rained, her umbrella inevitably blew inside-out, and taxis going too fast splashed her with dirty water. She caught every cold that was going around, and in April, she sprained her ankle in ballet class. In June, she came down with the measles.

At first, all the bad luck made Beth meaner than ever. She was especially mean to Liz, who she blamed for ruining her life.

"It's pretty awful," Liz agreed. "But I bet there's a way to break the curse--there usually is, in fairy tales. Maybe if you apologized to the Months. Or at least made it up to them somehow."

"Apologize?" growled Beth. "Why should I be the one to apologize? They're the ones who should apologize, for doing this to me. You're a creep." She made a grab at Liz's braid, missed, and fell out of bed onto Barbie's Dream House, scraping her arm painfully.

"Oh, poor Beth," said Liz. "But it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't tried to pull my hair. Think about it."



Beth was too miserable to answer her. But later, when the measles were itching like crazy and even her mother didn't want to keep her company, she thought about what Liz had said. What were the old man's words? "The luck you have asked for is yours." Maybe she had hurt the Months' feelings. Maybe there was something nice about June in New York she just hadn't noticed.

She looked out the window. The sky was clear a deep turquoise blue that made the buildings across the street look bright and sharp. A pigeon landed on her windowsill with a flutter of grey wings and cooed at her.

OK. Maybe June in New York wasn't so bad after all.

Once Beth had noticed the pigeon and the sky, she began to notice other things. She noticed that her mother kept bringing her food and books even when Beth threw them on the floor. She noticed that the rocks Liz brought her from Central Park had chips of mica in them that sparkled like tiny diamonds. She noticed that her stepfather always came into her room as soon as he got home from work and told her how they'd all go to Cape Cod in July and build sandcastles together. She noticed that she kind of liked it when he did that.

By the time she was over her measles and everyone went to Cape Cod, she didn't hate New York City nearly as much as she had. What's more, she could find both her shoes when she needed them, and the tunnels under her sandcastles didn't cave in, and the sandfleas bit everyone in the family, not just her.

It was like magic. By the time school started in the fall, Beth was down to little things that could happen to anyone, like losing ball-points and leaving her gloves in taxis. She pretty much got along with Liz and was usually nice to her stepfather and mostly did her homework on time. She tried Chinese food, and discovered that she liked it. In fact, Beth Dodson had become a pretty good kid.

That Thanksgiving, Beth and Liz decided to go back to the Metropolitan Museum to find the Twelve Months of Manhattan and thank them. But although the sisters did their best to get lost, they never found the back stairs that led to a small, dark room with nothing in it but a big, bright picture.