

“Yes, please.”

Marie-Claire said, “With such wonderful smells coming from the kitchen, I thought Laura must be baking.”

“Laura doesn’t like to do kitchen chores,” Céleste said. “But I’ll bring you girls a plate of cookies shortly, shall I?”

“Oh, I did not mean—”

Céleste laughed. “Don’t worry. I know you didn’t. I can tell that your parents have brought you up well.”



Laura closed the book she was reading and smiled. “Marie-Claire! I did not expect to see you again!”

“I bring *un cadeau* ... a present. For Christmas.” Marie-Claire put her hand in her

pocket. "I have no pretty paper to wrap, but here. I make it for you."

"What is it?"

Marie-Claire felt the smile fade from her face. "*C'est un ange,*" she said. "It is ... an angel. I make it."

"Oh, yes, I see." Laura ran a finger over the carving. "It's kind of bumpy."

Marie-Claire wanted suddenly to run from the room, angry and ashamed at the same time. How could Laura be so rude? And what had she, Marie-Claire, been thinking, bringing a gift to someone who had so many lovely things—a doll with real hair, a palace in a snowy little globe, a shiny white toilet.... What did she think such a person would want with a lumpy bit of soap?

"It is lovely, too. Thank you," Laura said quickly. She kissed Marie-Claire on the cheek. "I especially like her wings and her little halo."

Feeling somewhat reassured, Marie-Claire said, "A halo very little. I think she is not the most ... goodest of the angels." She giggled, nervous



about her use of English and imagining what sort of naughtiness a small-haloed angel might get up to.

Laura giggled too, then turned the soap angel over in her hand. "I can't believe you made this yourself."

Marie-Claire's back straightened. "Yes, I made it! I—"

Laura assured her that she *did* believe her.

"But you say, '*I can't believe you.*' Does it not mean—?"

Laura shook her head. "It means only that I think you are very clever."

Sometimes trying to understand English was so confusing. But then, it was probably hard to learn any language well just by listening to people chatting in the streets and in the square.

"Say," Laura said, dropping the soap angel onto the bed, "Christmas is only two days away. Do you know what you're getting?"

"In my family, we give a gift at ... *le jour de l'An.*"

“Not at Christmas?”

“No.” Marie-Claire held her thumb, said, “Christmas,” then counted with her fingers till she’d indicated enough days to make a week. Holding that finger she said, “*Le jour de l’An.*”

Laura nodded, but Marie-Claire wasn’t sure she’d really understood.

“I’m getting new skates,” Laura said.

“How you know?”

“Because that’s what I asked for.”

Marie-Claire’s mind reeled. Laura didn’t help in the kitchen because she didn’t like to. She had only to ask and she would receive whatever she wanted. And she thought nothing, it seemed, of receiving a gift bigger than would fit in a stocking. Marie-Claire had always been delighted by whatever little gift the Baby Jesus left her—an orange, a banana, or a piece of barley sugar in the shape of an animal. How lucky Laura was to be getting skates!

Marie-Claire was just figuring out how to say that she must be getting home when Laura’s