

Bottling the Sunshine

Bronislawa looked at her daughter playing on the floor. Maria's dark ringlets escaping from her headband as she moved small bottles, cups and bowls around. Smiling, the mother gently tucked the curls back, Maria didn't look up from her task. Their fifth child was as bright as a button, being the youngest, she had learnt quickly from her siblings. They had affectionately nicknamed her 'Mania'. Not yet four years old, she could already speak well and calculate simple sums.

Maria held a bottle up "Water Mama please."

Bronislawa nodded, "Of course my little Mania."

Taking the bottle she filled it from the water pitcher. This small flat was not suitable for the seven of them, but she'd had to give up her job at the Warsaw school after Maria was born. Her husband earned just enough with his teaching to feed and clothe them. They'd lost their savings and property through their support of Polish independence from the Russian Empire, but they were luckier than most.

She gave the bottle to the child, "Are you making dinner for us all Mania?"

Tipping water into a bowl, the child shook her head,

"No Mama, I look to see what's in the water." She held the bottle to the light and swirled it around.

Bronislawa smiled, "I must ask Papa what experiments he's been showing you!"

"I put half in here and you put it by the window Mama." The child was obsessed with the rays of sunlight that crept in through the shutters in the late afternoon, sending beams across the dark wooden furniture.

"I want to catch the sunshine Mama!" she'd laugh, jumping around the room and making shadows in the fading light.

"That would be a wonderful gift if you could catch it Mania, we could just take it out of a bottle whenever we needed it."

Sadly Bronislawa did not live to see her daughter's true gift and the effect it would have on the world. When Maria was just ten years old, her mother died from Tuberculosis. Maria threw herself into her studies; excelling in physics, chemistry and mathematics. Poland did not accept women in further education at that time. After working as a governess she saved enough money to continue her education at the University of Paris. She fell in love with a fellow scientist Pierre, marrying him a year later, he gave her the French version of her name, Marie. Together they carried out extensive research, leading to the discovery of radium and polonium.

In 1903 Marie Sklodowska Curie was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize with her husband Pierre Curie and Henri Becquerel, for their work on radioactivity, principles still used in x-rays today. She was the first woman to receive the award. Marie Curie's super power was her ability to continually research the elements and identify how they could be used in medical science, especially in cancer treatment. She achieved far more than catching the sunshine.