



VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA, 1942. When best friends Esther and Michiko spot the beautiful Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret dolls in the local toy store window, they long to get the dolls for their shared birthdays. But when Esther receives one doll and Michiko doesn't receive the other, their friendship starts to unravel.

The story is set against the backdrop of increasing hostility and suspicion directed at the Japanese Canadian community. Restrictions placed on Japanese Canadians are also increasing—culminating in the Internment.



ELLEN SCHWARTZ is the author of 17 children's books, ranging from picture books to young adult fiction. Her two picture books, *Abby's Birds* and *Mr. Belinsky's Bagels* (Tradewind), have garnered much critical acclaim. She lives in Burnaby, BC.

MARIKO ANDO was born in Osaka, Japan. She is an artist and illustrator and has exhibited widely in Japan and Canada. She lives in Vancouver, BC.



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The PRINCESS DOLLS



— ELLEN SCHWARTZ —

illustrations by MARIKO ANDO



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CHAPTER 1



The doorbell rang.
“I’ll get it!” Esther yelled. She clattered down the stairs and opened the door.

There on the doorstep stood three children. In the middle, Esther’s best friend, Michiko. On one side, Michi’s older brother, Tomo. On the other side, Michi’s little sister, Akiko.

Esther gasped, staring at Michi. Not at Michi herself, but at what she was wearing.

A cape. It tied around her neck with a blue ribbon, flowed over the shoulders of her winter coat and fell in soft curves around her body. It was made of satiny material that shimmered in tones of silver, blue and rosy-pink.

“Oh, Michi!” Esther said, as Tomo squeezed past her, heading upstairs to Jake’s room. “It’s—it’s *beautiful*! It’s for Princess Margaret, isn’t it?” At Michi’s nod, Esther went on, “It’s perfect. But where did you get it?”

Michiko smiled shyly. “I made it.”

“You *made* it!” Esther repeated. “How?”



"Well, Mom was getting rid of this old worn-out dress, so I cut off the top, sewed a loop at the top of the skirt part and threaded a ribbon through it. Simple, really."

"Simple for you, maybe," Esther said with a laugh.

Akiko tugged on Esther's shirt. "I helped!"

"You did?" Esther bent down.

"Yup. I handed Michi *everything*. The thread and the needle and even the scissors."

"I bet you were a big help, Kiko."

Michi rolled her eyes. "When she stayed out of the way," she whispered.

Esther giggled.

Michi held the cape open. The inside was the darkest blue velvet, almost black. "You can wear it the satin side out or the velvet side out, Esther. Depending on whether Princess Margaret is going to a ball, or just for a stroll around Buckingham Palace."

Esther sighed. "Oh, Michi, I wish I had one for Princess Elizabeth. Then we could be princesses together."

Akiko wiggled. Michi elbowed her.

Esther looked from one sister to the other.

Michi grinned. Then she handed Esther a paper bag. Esther hadn't noticed it sitting on the doormat.

Esther drew out a cape—an identical cape—then looked at Michi in wonder.

Michi laughed. "Of course I made you one, silly. Two capes for two best friends. You are Princess Elizabeth and I am Princess Margaret."

Esther flung the cape over her shoulders. The velvet hugged her in a soft embrace. She threw her arms around Michi. "Thank you, thank you, thank you! Oh, Michi, it's beautiful. It's perfect." She struck a pose, one hand on her hip, the other raised in a royal wave. "Do I look like Princess Elizabeth?"

"You look like a goofy girl playing dress-up," said Jake, who had come downstairs with Tomo.

"Hey!"

He ducked out of the way as Esther went to smack him. "Come on, we'd better get moving, or we'll be late for the movie."

...

The five children walked down Hastings Street toward the Pantages Theatre. Esther linked her arm through Michi's. "Shall we promena-a-a-ade through the palace, my dear sister Margaret?" she said in her best British accent.

"Yes, indeed, do let's, Elizabeth," Michi answered.

They walked arm in arm, taking slow, regal steps. Jake and Tomo moved ahead.

"I want to be a princess too," Akiko said.

"You can't," Michiko said. "We have only two princesses."

"But..." Akiko's lower lip wobbled.

"Tell you what, Kiko," Esther said. "You can hold up our capes, so they don't drag in the mud. Okay?"

"Okay!" Akiko skipped behind the two older girls, picked up the hem of each of their capes and followed along with slow steps. "I'm 'portant, aren't I?"

"Very 'portant," Esther assured her.

"Wasn't that a splendid ball last night, Margaret?" Esther asked, leaning toward Michi.

"Oh, yes, it was divine. And the refreshments, so delicious."

"Especially the champagne," Esther said with a grin.

"Esther! I mean, Elizabeth!"

Both girls dissolved in laughter.

Jake turned around. "Come on, slowpokes. We'll never get there at this rate."

"Bossy pants," Esther shouted back. But she didn't want to be late either. She turned to Michi. "Let's go horseback riding, Margaret."

They posed their hands in front of them, as if holding reins, then started galloping down the street.



"Wait for me!" Akiko cried.

Esther and Michiko each grabbed one of Akiko's arms and lifted her between them. Akiko shrieked with laughter. They galloped faster, tromping down the sidewalk until they caught up to Jake and Tomo.

"What on earth are you two doing?" Jake said.

Sticking her chin up, Esther said with as much dignity as she could muster, "We're royal princesses, riding our thoroughbreds, if you must know."

Jake and Tomo hooted with laughter. "More like stampeding elephants," Tomo said.

"Why, you—" Michi went for her brother, but he skipped out of the way.

"Pay no attention to those oafs, Margaret," Esther said, and they resumed their run.

As they pranced past Adachi's Shoes, Jimmy, a boy in their class at Strathcona School, came toward them. He pointed at Michi, Tomo and Akiko. "Go back to Japan!" he yelled.

The five children stood there, frozen.

Then Jake shouted, "They can't go *back*, dummy. They've never been there." Jimmy ran off. Esther, glancing at Michi's grim face, wished she had thought of saying that.

They walked on in silence. A moment later, though, when they came up to Rafelson's Toy Shop, Jimmy's words flew out of Esther's head. She stopped short.

The usual assortment of toys filled Rafelson's front window. Teddy bears and checkers games, building blocks and miniature tea sets, toy soldiers and paints. But today there was more.

Two dolls—two princesses—were propped on a platform high above the other toys. Each was about a foot tall. They stood upright, gazing out above the girls' heads.

Princess Elizabeth—it was *her* face exactly—wore tiny white gloves, shiny black pumps and a stylish powder-blue coat. Thick waves of real-looking brown hair curled around her porcelain face. A sparkling tiara crowned her head, and a faint smile tinged her red painted lips.

Next to her, Princess Margaret was dressed in a maroon cardigan over a ruffled white blouse and a navy, red and green plaid skirt. Circles of pink made her porcelain cheeks look rosy, and shiny black Mary Janes glinted on her feet.

"Oh, Michi..."

"Oh, Esther..."

They looked at one another, then turned the door handle.

"What do you think you're doing?" Jake asked. "We'll be late for the movie."

"Tomo, take Akiko," Michi said, thrusting her sister at her brother. Before he could protest, she and Esther slipped inside.



Mr Rafelson was stacking model-airplane kits on a shelf.
 “Good afternoon, Esther and Michiko. What can I do for you girls?”

“The dolls. The princess dolls . . .”

Mr Rafelson smiled. “Yes, they are wonderful, aren’t they?”

“How . . . how much?”

“Fifteen dollars.”

“Each?” Michi squeaked.

Mr Rafelson nodded.

Esther gasped. “So much!”

“I know it’s a lot. But the dolls came all the way from England, you see.”

Esther leaned close to Michi. “Our birthdays are coming up.”

Esther and Michi had been born on the same day, February 7, 1933. That was how their families had met and become friends.

“But Mom and Dad could never . . .” Michi didn’t finish.

“There’s got to be a way,” Esther said. But even as she said it, she knew it was impossible. The princess dolls were way too expensive.



But if only...

Jake and Tomo poked their heads through the doorway.

“Come *on!*” Jake said.

He grabbed Esther’s hand, Tomo grabbed Michi’s, and Michi grabbed Akiko’s. In a raggedy line, they ran the rest of the way to the cinema.

