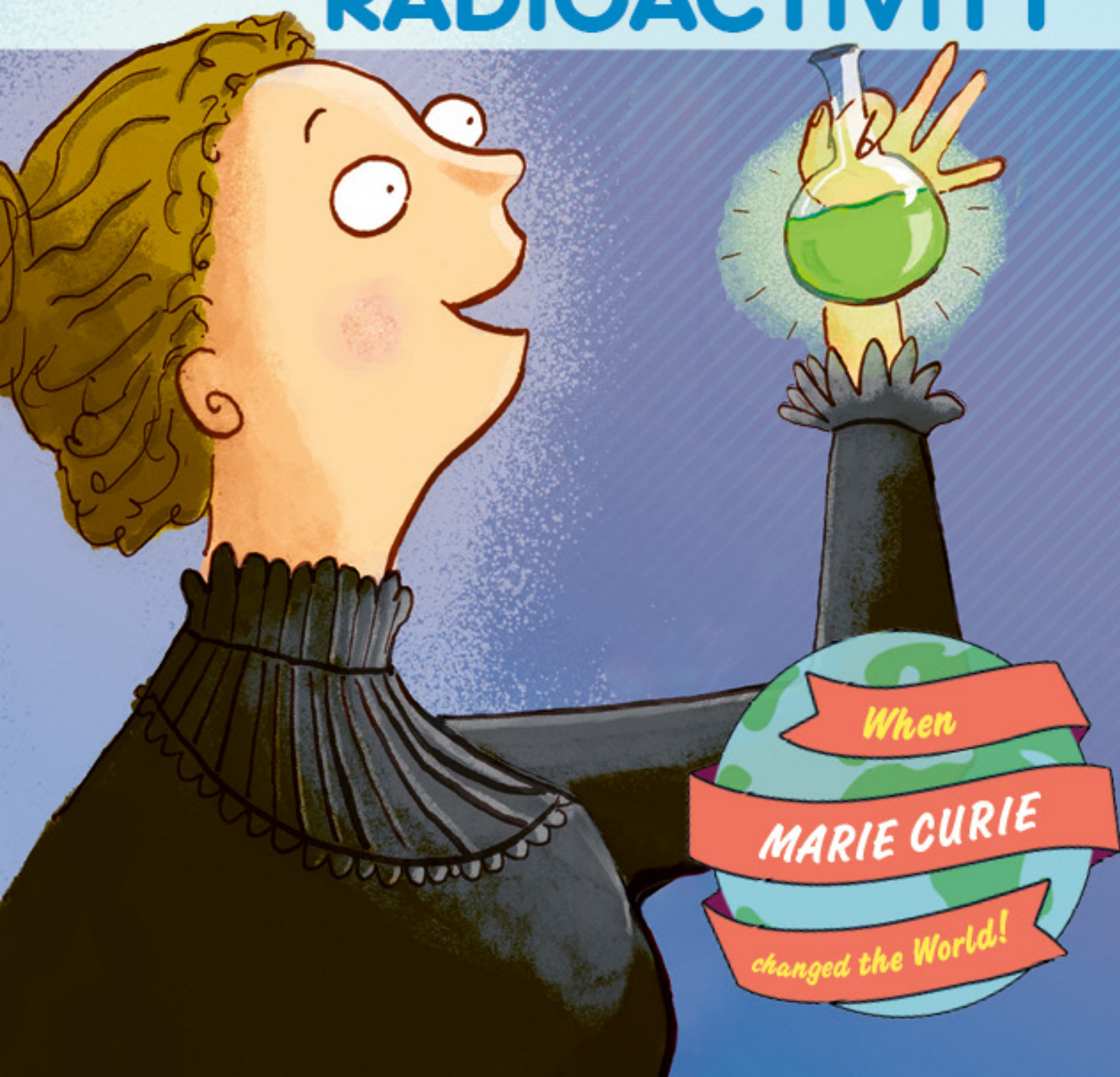


# THE EUREKA! MOMENT



*Marie Curie and*  
**RADIOACTIVITY**





# Chapter 1

1883



**W**hen I was 15 years old the grand master of education in Russian Poland, Monsieur Apushtin, visited my school. It was my last year there. We were all gathered together in the school hall. Then Monsieur Apushtin called out my name in a loud, deep voice – Maria Skłodowska. His voice echoed around the hall. When I walked out in front of everyone, he gave me a gold medal for graduating first in my year. My father expected nothing less, but he was very proud all the same.

In Warsaw under Russian rule, girls couldn't go any further in school or university. It wasn't allowed. It was illegal to educate girls. Can you believe it? Of course, we didn't put up with it.

## Marie's family

The woman who would become Marie Curie was born in Warsaw on 7 November 1867, and named Maria Salomea Skłodowska. Her nickname in the family was Manya. Her father, Vladislav Skłodowski, was a professor who taught physics and mathematics. Her mother, Bronislawa, was the headmistress of a girls' school. Manya was the youngest of five children. When she was ten years old, her mother died from tuberculosis. Three years later her oldest sister, Sophie, died from typhus.

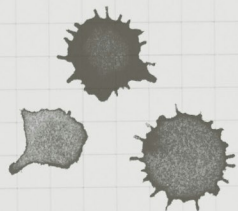
We Poles are made of stronger stuff. We had to be. We disobeyed the Russians who controlled our country and their laws. Teachers carried on teaching Polish girls, but they had to do it in secret. They gave private lessons in people's homes and institutions all over Warsaw. The classes moved around from place to place to avoid discovery, so it was called the Flying University. Anyone found breaking the law could be sent to a freezing prison in Siberia, so we had to be very careful.

My older sister, Bronya, wanted to become a doctor. The only way she could do it was to move to Paris and study at the university there, the Sorbonne. It was one of very few universities in Europe that allowed women to study. But even with her savings she didn't have enough money. Then I had an idea. I told Bronya, "I have thought a lot about this problem. I've talked to father about it. And I think I have an answer."

Bronya looked unsure. "I can pay the train

## Russian Poland

Poland was defeated several times in war during the nineteenth century. Its land was taken by its enemies and divided between them. Marie Curie grew up in part of Poland that belonged to the Russian Empire. The Russians banned the Polish language in schools, replaced Polish teachers with Russian ones, and burned Polish books. Polish children had to speak Russian at school. Poland would not be an independent country again until after World War I (1914–18).



fare to Paris and have enough money to live on for one year. But the medical course is five years long. It's impossible."

I explained my plan. "If we struggle separately, we'll both fail, but if we work together..."

"What do you mean – work together?"

I said, "Go to Paris and spend your money for as long as it lasts. Meanwhile, I will look for work as a governess. When your money runs out, father and I will be able to send you enough to carry on and finish your course. When you finish your studies, you can do the same for me. So with my plan, instead of failing we both succeed."

And that's what we did. Bronya left for Paris and I worked as a governess. Father and I sent money to her and she finished her course. Just before she was to become a doctor, and she was about to marry another doctor, a letter arrived for me from Paris. I recognised the writing straight away. It was from Bronya telling me that it was

finally my turn to come to Paris. But by then I had promised my old father that I would stay with him in Warsaw. After years working as a governess my dream of going to university in Paris had faded away. But Bronya persuaded me. She made me want to study again and, with my father's permission, I decided to go.

While I was waiting for my classes at the Sorbonne to begin, I went back to the wonderful Flying University. And for the first time in my life I walked into a science laboratory. It was at the Museum of Industry and Agriculture. It was there that I did my very first science experiments. I felt so at home in the laboratory. I knew that this was what I was going to do for the rest of my life if I possibly could. I was ready to go to the Sorbonne.

And then it was time to leave for Paris. I bought the cheapest ticket – fourth class. The carriage, a ladies-only carriage, didn't even have any seats! I brought my own folding stool to sit on. It was a

very long journey – more than a thousand miles by steam train. It took 40 hours. And the carriage was freezing cold. There was no heating in fourth class! I wrapped myself in a quilt to keep warm. I brought all the food and drink I'd need for the journey and read books to pass the time.