Chapter 10. Grade 5

I

From her first day in fifth grade, Josy adored her teacher. Miss Fom was an exceptionally beautiful woman in her late twenties, with shining black hair pinned back in a bun, classical features, thoughtful hazel eyes, and olive skin. Josy admired her regal bearing, her tastefully stylish clothes, and her warm manner.

Miss Fom made it seem as if she were lavishing special personal attention on each child. It was on her recommendation that Malvina took Josy to an ophthalmologist, who confirmed that Josy was indeed significantly near-sighted. He prescribed her first pair of glasses a few days after her tenth birthday.

As soon as she put them on, she realized how much she had been missing. Everything immediately sprang into sharp focus. For the first half-hour, she had the sen-

sation of walking on stilts ten feet above the ground. This happened for a short while every time she got new lenses. Dr. Seidel, the ophthalmologist, explained. “Tall people usually react as you do,” he said, “but short folks complain about feeling too close to the ground! It will pass.”

And it did, every time she got her new glasses, usually within half an hour. From that first pair in fifth grade, she always put them on the first thing every morning and wore them till bedtime.

Miss Fom was a good teacher. She constantly stressed the importance of being patriotic.

“America is a very strong country,” she stressed, “but also an extremely fair one.”

She pointed out that, just a year before, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had promised to grant independence to the Philippine Islands, to become effective in 1946.

“Now that is something America doesn’t have to do,” she emphasized. “It just shows how generous we are!

“And remember,” she insisted whenever she got the chance, “our country has never ever lost a war! Never!”

At this, Arthur Fierman, the redheaded boy sitting next to Josy, let out a slight cheer. Little did he know that ten years later he would be killed in World War II when his Air Force plane would be shot down over Germany.

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Beginning two months after the start of the term, boys and girls went to separate classes twice a week after the science lesson, the boys going to Woodshop, the girls to Sewing. The first time this happened, Mrs. Heck, the sewing teacher, arrived at eleven o’clock to usher the girls across the hall to her room with the sewing machines. She assigned four girls to each table, in the center of which stood a tiny tray, neatly arranged with a pair of scissors, a pack of needles, a pincushion complete with pins, several spools of thread, a few thimbles, and a tape measure. The rest of each tabletop lay bare.

In Science they had been studying magnetism, and that morning Josy’s father had given her a magnet to take to school. She was extremely excited and proud of it, and Miss Fom praised her for bringing it in, urging her to take special care of it for the rest of the day. As soon as she got seated in the sewing room, Josy carefully set the magnet down on the tray at the table center and turned to listen to the teacher.

Mrs. Heck began by describing the coming year's projects. First they would be constructing their own cloth sewing bags for carrying and storing their supplies and fabric. Next, they would make potholders, and after that, aprons. Finally, each girl would make herself a skirt to wear to school on the last day of class. Everyone seemed excited at the prospect.

Just as she began to explain some of the stitches they would be using, Josy's friend Dorothy Henderson reached across the table and grabbed the magnet. Without thinking, Josy reached out to pull it back. The magnet caught onto the scissors, and as she snatched it out of Dorothy's grasp, the scissors came loose and fell with a loud clang onto the tabletop. Mrs. Heck froze in mid-sentence. Coldly, she eyed Josy.

"How dare you!" she snarled.

Josy tried to explain, but Mrs. Heck cut her off.

"Don't you answer me back," she snapped. "I never heard of such a thing!"

Giving Josy no time to say anything, she returned to the lesson.

After class, Josy went up to Mrs. Heck to explain what had happened, but the teacher refused to listen. From that day on, everything Josy did in her class came under suspicion. Whenever anything went wrong anywhere in the room, it was Josy that Mrs. Heck looked at immediately. Each time she asked a question, Mrs. Heck replied coldly, "Anyone with sense knows that!"

At home Malvina encouraged Josy to ignore all this. "Just do your best," she told her, "and everything will work out."

Josy tried especially hard to do well in Sewing Class, but nothing changed. In April the girls began making their skirts. Josy brought in a swatch of yellow cotton cloth with a tiny black and green print. Mrs. Heck eyed it, saying nothing, but sniffed disapprovingly.

"Now here is the stitch we are going to use for the seam," she directed the class. "It's a new one for you, and a little bit tricky."

She demonstrated several times. "The girl who gets it right and finishes first will get an extra 100 points."

Everybody got to work in earnest. Soon, however, most ran into difficulty. One after the other, they brought their fabric up to the teacher for approval. One by one, she sent them back to their seats to try again. Several whined when the teacher's back was turned, but Josy, speaking to nobody, stuck diligently to the task at hand. Finally, she took her half-completed sewing up front for the teacher to inspect. Mrs. Heck studied the work carefully, then stood up.

"Girls," she called out, "I have an announcement to make." Holding up Josy's work, she declared, "This stitch is correct. Right now Josephine seems to be coming in first. But that doesn't mean anything. If you try, the rest of you can still finish up before she does and beat her."

From that moment on, Josy felt such a deep aversion to sewing that she avoided it whenever she could. Something as simple as replacing a button or performing a minor repair became a distasteful, unbearably traumatic chore. It was something she was never able to overcome in the years ahead.

II

That year Celia Kirson came from Chicago for a long stay. Her sister Frieda, Malvina's dearest friend, had died of breast cancer on December 31, 1934. Celia, whom Frieda had always babied, was now completely helpless and lost.

Malvina wrote to Ben Weintroub asking him to find out how she could help. After visiting Celia he wrote back, "The only thing you can do is go out and buy her a train ticket so she can come stay with you for a while. She's incapable of doing anything for herself!"

Following his advice, Malvina purchased a ticket and mailed it to Celia, who arrived a week later. She remained for three months. Celia spent a great deal of time with Josy during that period, fussing over her, holding long conversations on everything from Greek mythology to what they would have for dinner.

"Darling," Celia called her in a heavily accented voice. She pronounced it "Dollink", and often she would swoop down on Josy without warning, grabbing her and hugging her wildly.

Once they got into a discussion about the exact color of the dark blue dress that Celia was wearing.

"It's navy blue," Celia declared.

"But, really," Josy countered, "the blue has purple in it. I think it's more like plum color."

"Plum color!" Celia shouted joyously, again springing across the room and throwing out her arms for a hug. "What a smart child she is! Plum color! Imagine! Plum color!"

She ran into the kitchen, where Malvina was preparing dinner, and recounted this

as if it were the greatest discovery in the world.

Slowly, Celia grew more secure. She finally left to return home, and her niece Fannie Weinberg (and for a while Fannie's brother Mookie), both still unmarried and in their early twenties, came to live with her, an arrangement that would last for the next fifteen years.

III

It was because of the Sokoloffs (distant cousins of Celia) that Malvina and Jacques had first moved into the apartment on Duncannon Avenue. By now Simon and Emma were not only neighbors, but good friends. Simon was a gawky man, over six feet three. Once, in trying to tell about an enormous ocean breaker that had almost knocked her down while swimming, Josy described it as "so big that it was even higher than Uncle Simon!"

Little children were especially drawn to him. They climbed up on his knees uninvited, and followed him around as if he were the Pied Piper. On the other hand, they inadvertently shied away from Emma, even though she loved children and invariably kept toys and presents handy to give them. Emma was tall, stately, and enormously stout, with an authoritative bearing. Her face was pretty, her dark hair pulled back severely into a knot. On anyone with less classic features this would have been unbecoming, but on Emma it had a somewhat Spanish look. With her ample bosom, enormous torso, and tiny feet, she seemed top-heavy. She reminded Josy of a mother bird.

Her sister Masha Gomberg lived with the Sokoloffs. In many ways, they treated her as their child. Much younger than Emma, Masha was short, skinny, and slightly hunchbacked. She scrunched up her nose and squinted whenever she spoke. She worked as a milliner, but otherwise remained totally dependent upon Emma and Simon. The two sisters argued frequently. Once Josy overheard Emma snap at Masha, "Just you remember, it's *my* house and I give the orders around here!"

Emma found it difficult to get around because of her obesity. She had to rely on public transportation, since Simon used the car for work, but she found it too taxing to climb into buses or trolleys. With no children or job, she had a great deal of free time on her hands. She spent much of it shopping by phone.

At least once or twice a week she called various department stores and ordered huge quantities of merchandise. These would be delivered free of charge to her door. Then in

the privacy of her apartment she would try on dresses, coats, suits, and shoes. Occasionally she even ordered furniture and small appliances. Usually she selected one or two items to keep, then called the store to come pick up the rest. Each week, trucks from Wanamakers, Strawbridges, Snellenbergs, Gimbels, and Lit Brothers Department Stores pulled up regularly in front of the apartment building to deliver new merchandise and collect what she was returning.

Malvina and Emma occasionally got into slight disputes over trivial matters. Once when Malvina mentioned that Josy should listen only to classical music, Emma objected.

"What about jazz?" she countered.

"It's vulgar!" Malvina sniffed.

This led into a discussion about tap dancing. It was very popular at the time, and most of the neighborhood girls took lessons, either in tap or ballet. Malvina would permit none of these for Josy.

"But tap dancing is an art," Emma would protest, referring to Fred Astaire as an example.

"That's not what I call art," Malvina retorted. "How does it compare with classical music? Art is in museums!"

And so they bickered on and on, never settling the question.

The Sokoloffs came to regard Josy as the child they never had, and they loved her dearly.

Emma often seemed out of breath. Sometimes her hands trembled (she eventually died of Parkinson's Disease), and she pronounced Josy's name as "Jos-phine", catching her breath between syllables. Once, shortly after Josy had an argument with her parents, they all came downstairs to the Sokoloffs' apartment and then Josy went outside on the large open porch to sulk. Minutes later, Emma joined her.

"What's the matter, Jos-phine?" she asked.

"My parents holler at me all the time!" Josy sobbed.

"Well, you can always come and live here with Uncle Simon and me," Emma reassured her.

"Oh, I couldn't do that!" Josy gasped.

"Why not?" Emma asked.

"Well, because," and Josy hesitated, "it wouldn't be the same." Thinking further, she elaborated, "I wouldn't have the same cousins or anything!"

Emma loved this explanation so much that she reminisced about it for years.

One day when Malvina had a doctor's appointment and was unable to get home in time to give Josy lunch, she asked Emma if Josy could eat at her place. She prepared soup, a sandwich, and a bowl of pudding, all of which she left at the Sokoloffs.

That evening Josy told her mother that the soup at lunch today was absolutely delicious.

"Why can't you make soup as good as Mrs. Sokoloff's?" she demanded.

When the Sokoloffs finally moved away to Oak Lane just north of Logan, Josy's family moved downstairs into their newly vacated apartment. This had the same layout as the one on the third floor, but also included a huge forty-foot open porch spanning the entire width of the building. High branches from nearby trees spread over the porch, providing shade and making it a cozy retreat.

"You could entertain fifty people out there," Malvina would say in describing it.

IV

Just before they moved downstairs, the Faliks rented the other third-floor apartment that the Feldmarks had originally occupied on first moving into the building. Because the entry doors to both apartments stood side by side, Malvina soon got to know them well. She learned that Martha was the second wife of Maurice Falik, his first having died in childbirth, leaving him with an infant son, Herby. Maurice had remarried when the boy was two years old, and now a year later, Herby had turned into a chubby youngster with big blue eyes and a startling booming voice.

Soon after they moved in, Herby began waking the neighborhood at six in the morning with loud singing. The Faliks, hoping to gain an extra hour of sleep, put him outside on the back fire escape as soon as he woke up. The place was safely fenced in, but Herby soon got bored there. To entertain himself he would sing, bellowing out song after song in a roaring voice that reverberated loudly across the back yards below. Fortunately for the Feldmarks, their apartment faced in the other direction, but faint echoes of Herby's guttural singing still came wafting in through their open windows. Neighbors in the row houses behind the apartment house got the worst of it. They called the police several times, but this caused even more of a commotion than Herby's singing. Fortunately winter soon set in and it got too cold to place Herby outdoors.

Soon after the Faliks moved in, Martha became pregnant. The Feldmarks had

already moved downstairs to the Sokoloffs' former apartment on the second floor, but Malvina kept in touch with them and tried to help Martha with small errands.

Martha gave birth to a baby girl but died during the delivery. Twice widowed, Maurice now was left with a four-year-old son and an infant girl to care for. Soon afterwards he moved to a small row house on Sixteenth Street several blocks away. The Feldmarks continued to keep in touch with him and help in way they could.

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A family of gypsies rented a house at the end of the block on Eleventh Street and, from the day they arrived, they caused trouble. There were about eight children; no one was sure exactly how many. The oldest, fifteen-year-old Yolanda, was extremely beautiful and mature-looking, with enormous liquid eyes, dark hair, and a dusky complexion. Almost every evening she went out with a different older man. During the afternoons, she stood on the corner of Eleventh and Windrim, accosting strangers in passing cars. Her mother, watching from the porch nearby, would smile approvingly.

Her eleven-year-old brother Leonard was the terror of the neighborhood. For no apparent reason he would punch all the girls his age or younger. He broke bottles, cursed, shrieked wildly, and wreaked havoc on the street. Most children feared him so much they were afraid to venture outdoors. Terrified parents complained to his mother, but Mrs. Ossic responded with screams and curses, slamming the door in their faces.

The police were called several times. Although they restored calm, a new ruckus would break out once they left. Often bottles came flying out of the upstairs window. Loud arguments and shouting became a daily occurrence. One day after a heated argument, the police carted Yolanda away to the station for spitting at them and scratching an officer. The mayhem with Leonard grew worse and worse

Once Harriet Forman, the nine-year-old living in the first row house on Eleventh Street next to the apartment building, managed to escape into her vestibule before Leonard caught her. Slamming the door as he came charging after her, she made the mistake of rushing upstairs and sticking her head out the window, shouting taunts at him. The next day he lay in wait for her behind a tree. Grabbing her as she was about to cross the street, he beat her so unmercifully that she sported two black eyes and limped for days.

Josy tried to avoid him as best she could. But although she never said a word to him, he managed, whenever he spied her at a distance, to come running over and deliver several punches to her arms and head. One day as she was leaving the schoolyard, he came roaring out of the building. Grabbing the angora hat off her head, he climbed a tree and tore out huge fistfuls of angora, shrieking and laughing wildly as he flung these down at her.

The following afternoon Malvina made it a point to watch for him. She finally spotted him coming down the street. Approaching, she called out, "You're a nothing but a big sissy!"

Leonard stopped dead in his tracks.

"What?" he retorted.

"You're a big sissy!" she repeated. "I've been watching you. You beat up my daughter. She's only ten years old. And I notice that you pick only on girls. They're all smaller than you. You never pick on a boy, or on anyone your own size!"

Leonard stood speechless for a moment.

"Which one's your daughter?" he demanded.

Malvina pointed out Josy.

He considered for a moment.

"Don't worry," he finally responded. "I'll never touch her again!"

And he never did. While other children hid behind bushes, shrank furtively into doorways, and crept around the neighborhood in fear, Josy walked calmly back and forth to school, played outdoors, roller-skated, and ran errands for her mother, completely unbothered. Others marveled at this. While the bully continued to torment others, he completely ignored her.

Things finally came to a head when a group of neighbors, on the advice of the local councilman, went door to door collecting signatures on a petition demanding that the Ossic family be evicted. Malvina gladly joined in signing it. Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Ossic came knocking on her door. In tears, and in a voice oozing with honey, she begged and pleaded with Malvina to speak out on her behalf. Her reasoning was that "Leonard doesn't even bother your daughter anymore!"

When Malvina firmly refused and closed the door, Mrs. Ossic's curses and threats of future violence rang through the apartment hallway. The Ossic family was evicted the next day. Nobody in the neighborhood ever heard from them again.

V

In 1935 newspapers were full of the story of the Lindbergh kidnapping trial. At the supper table in their small kitchen, in what became a nightly ritual, Jacques read aloud from the newspaper that day's word-for-word account of the trial. He and Malvina both expressed admiration for the skill of the prosecuting attorney, as the dexterity of his questions kept casting more and more suspicion on the accused Hauptmann. Once presented with evidence of how rings in the wood of the stepladder found propped outside the baby's bedroom window matched identically with those in the lumber discovered inside Hauptmann's garage, the public decided he was guilty.

Malvina immediately concluded that Hauptmann must have been an anti-Semite. Didn't he seek to blame the murder on his absent associate, a Jew named Mr. Fish?

Several weeks later, Jacques arrived home from work one evening, quietly took off his coat, and announced, "Well, they just executed Hauptmann!"

Though everyone had been expecting it, and public opinion was that justice had been done, the news still came as a shock. People spoke of it later as "the trial of the century", its echoes reverberating for years.

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In those days, radio was the prime source of entertainment for most families. On Sunday afternoons a few minutes before three o'clock, Malvina insisted that Josy come inside from play and sit on the sofa in front of the large set to listen to the weekly hour-long symphony concert, broadcast from New York City on Station WJZ. Milton Cross was the announcer and commentator. During the fifteen-minute intermission he discussed in detail the music on that day's program. Gradually, despite her original resistance, she came to enjoy these sessions. When they played "The Tea Rose", she decided then and there that Mozart was her favorite composer. Melody intrigued her even more than harmony or rhythm.

Sunday nights were her favorites. "The Eddie Cantor Show" came on at seven-thirty, and the whole family would gather in the living room to listen. One time after it was over, Josy cried because it would be a whole week before she could tune in again. What she especially liked about Eddie Cantor was that, in addition to being funny, he often

introduced talented young performers near her own age. Two of these were Bobby Breen, a boy soprano, and Deanna Durbin. Both got their start on the "Eddie Cantor Radio Show". Bobby was about eleven years old when he first appeared. He eventually made a movie in Hollywood, but a couple years afterwards his boy soprano voice changed, ending his career.

Deanna Durbin, though, enjoyed longer-lasting success. This vivacious, pretty fourteen-year-old sang classical and operatic arias. Her radio performances, as well as such films as *Three Smart Girls*, *Mad About Music*, and *One Hundred Men and A Girl* (in which she co-starred with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra) helped make classical musical popular among the general public, especially young people. By 1938, Deanna Durbin was the idol of almost every teen-age girl in America. On a visit to the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, Holland years later, Josy would be deeply moved to see a picture of Deanna Durbin pinned to the bulletin board of souvenirs that Anne Frank kept before she died.

VI

Once when a heavy snowstorm closed most of the roads, Jacques and Malvina decided to take a walk and with Josy, got all the way to Broad Street through the heavy drifts. To their surprise, they found the Rockland Theater open and, on the spur of the moment, went inside to see the movie *The Blue Angel* with Marlene Deitrich. Josy was enchanted with the whole experience. Weeks later, they went again (no snow this time) to see *Death Takes A Holiday*. On the walk home, Josy listened as her parents discussed how good an actor Frederic March was, and how classically handsome he was. She decided then and there that she would start collecting pictures of him.

Creating movie-star albums was the rage of girls in the neighborhood. All had their own favorite stars. They hung out at the candy store at Eleventh and Lindley, browsing through movie magazines to see which had the most photos of the star they liked best. After lengthy deliberation, if they had saved up ten cents to a quarter, they might even buy a magazine or two. The storekeeper was amazingly patient with them, although every once in a while when they made too much noise, he would shoo them out of the store and keep them out for the next couple of days.

Josy's friends sometimes clipped out photos of each other's favorites, then traded

these for pictures of their own idols. Many collected photos of Claudette Colbert, then just becoming famous. One magazine used the initials *C-C* to advertise her as "cute", "capricious", "coquettish", "cunning", and "clever". Several girls even began sporting hairstyles with Claudette Colbert bangs. Each had her own different special movie star, but everybody, without exception, collected Shirley Temple.

Josy traded pictures mostly with Harriet Forman, who lived in the row house next door to the apartment. Harriet's favorite actor was Franchot Tone. She and Josy set up a pulley system between Harriet's bedroom and Josy's back window. Along this line they passed written messages back and forth, as well as envelopes containing pictures. It all seemed adventurous. After a time Harriet began sending clippings of actresses who had performed with Frederic March, such as Norma Shearer, Anna Sten, Olivia DeHavilland, and Merle Oberon. Josy accepted these happily, enlarging her album. But when she tried to reciprocate by sending back photos of Joan Crawford and other Franchot Tone costars, Harriet grew disinterested. She accused Josy of making her water down her collection, and the pulley-line soon came down.

Malvina and Jacques expressed displeasure with her hobby.

"I don't want you becoming one of those 'movie fans'!" Jacques often admonished.

Knowing of their disapproval, she hid her scrapbooks in the back of the huge dining-room closet. She thought her parents would never find them there, but eventually, after Josy turned thirteen, Malvina came across the albums and threw them all out, along with the dolls that Josy had by this time outgrown.

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Each Friday evening before supper, as he had been doing for the past couple of years, as soon as Jacques arrived home from work, he took Josy to the Free Public Library at Old York Road and Windrim Avenue several blocks away. He often allowed her to invite a friend along. Usually she chose Edith Sindell, a girl from her fifth grade class that she liked very much. It was an outing Josy looked forward to eagerly.

Then after a couple months, Edith declined to go. For no apparent reason, she suddenly drew away from Josy and displayed an exaggerated fondness for a group of older girls from sixth grade. She seemed to go out of her way to flaunt this friendship in front of Josy, taking extra care to make sure Josy observed it. One day coming home from

school at lunchtime, Josy found herself walking alone directly behind this group. Edith, singing joyously in the middle, laughed overly loudly and merrily, arms linked with the others, deliberately ignoring her. Once inside the door at home, Josy burst into tears. She felt bitterly dejected and alone. She never did find out the reason for Edith's change of heart.

After that she went to the library alone with her father on Friday nights. Often she heard her parents discussing European authors, so in fifth grade she tried to read *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo. Around that time, a film version was due to come out. It was to star her favorite actor Frederic March as Jean Valjean, which made the book sound even more appealing. One day at the open-air sidewalk stall of Leary's Bookstore, she came across a hard-back copy of *Les Miserables* costing fifty cents. The insides of both front and back covers were lined with pictures of scenes from the movie. She bought the book immediately.

Malvina cautioned her that the book might be too hard for her, especially the first fifty pages. These, Josy soon found out, dealt with the life of the abbé who would later give the famed candlesticks to Jean Valjean, changing his life forever. Accordingly she skipped this section and started at the place where Jean Valjean first appeared. Soon she found the book impossible to put down. She read and reread certain parts tirelessly. The one she loved best was the episode where Jean Valjean gave Cosette her first doll. This brought tears to Josy's eyes. It got to the point where, after almost a year, Malvina actually took the book out of Josy's hands and hid it so that she would go on to read something different.

VII

In 1935 Chicago held a World's Fair. Malvina used this as an excuse to visit her friends there, staying for about ten days. She found Celia Kirson, Ben Weintroub, the Grodskys, the Liphs, and her cousins the Tecotzkys as dear to her heart as ever. While she was away, Jacques gave Josy permission to see two movies on the weekend.

"Either Friday night, Saturday afternoon, or Saturday evening, any combination, but just two," he told her.

After much deliberation, she settled for Friday evening and Saturday afternoon. On Saturday night, she and Jacques stayed home. This turned out to be just the time when

Malvina called long-distance. At the World's Fair, just as she entered the Bell Telephone Pavilion, a special offer was being announced. Visitors were invited to make one free telephone call to any part of the United States. There were two conditions, though. First, the call could last no more than three minutes and, second, the speaker was to avoid mentioning that the call was free.

Malvina got into a quickly-forming line and phoned Philadelphia. In those days, such a call was considered a tremendous extravagance, and Jacques wondered, a bit worried, why she had phoned at all. Only after she had returned home did she explain. The lady ahead of her in line had called California, and the minute she got connected, had announced, "Guess what! This call is free!" They had cut her off immediately. Not wanting to have the same thing happen to her, Malvina waited to get home before explaining.

VIII

For three years, until she was about eleven, Josy attended the Arbeitering Folkshul for her religious training. She went after school on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, and then again on Sunday mornings. Classes were taught in Yiddish by Mr. Novak. He was a learned man, pleasant and jovial, who loved the children but, somehow, Josy never caught much fire or enthusiasm from his teaching.

One Sunday morning, when he got to the story of how Abraham had become a Jew, he left it unfinished.

"I'll give you the answer next Sunday," he announced.

"Please tell us now, Mr. Novak!" the children pleaded, but he only laughed.

"Never mind! Next week! Next week!" he chuckled, and walked out.

All week long Josy fidgeted and pondered, wondering what the great revelation would be. Finally, when Sunday came, she was the first to remind him of his promise.

"Oh, yes," he replied casually. He described how God had simply pronounced Abraham a Jew. This she found most disappointing.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"That's all," he replied. "The subject is closed."

From then on, she grew less and less interested in her Yiddish classes.

Mr. Novak's wife was a charming woman, refined, personable, and highly intelligent. Before long, she and Malvina became very friendly. Her only child Ruth was a full

year ahead of Josy in school. Both mothers tried to encourage a friendship between their girls, but it never amounted to much.


Josy with Ruth Novaak.

Most children at Birney School kept their distance from Ruth, probably because she was bookish. Josy liked her, though, and admired her for her scholarly interests. But Ruth, while cordial, let it be known that her real friends were Martha Yanishevsky (a pretty blond girl in Josy's grade) and Marvin Bressler, son of the Arbeitering's most active member, and half a grade ahead of Josy in school.

Ruth, Martha, and Marvin kept together whenever they could, openly excluding everyone else. They went on outings to museums, concerts, or the library each weekend. They let it be known that they felt intellectually superior. Josy longed to be included, but they never asked her. This distressed her enormously. She was unable to claim that they rejected her on the basis of immaturity, since Martha was the same age as she. Josy realized that her other classmates, with their flighty interests and disdain for her love of classical music, fell far short of the standards this elite trio represented. She felt caught between two different worlds, fitting into neither. Ruth remained pleasant and courteous to her when the other two were away, but as soon as they appeared, Josy felt like an outsider. She took these slights greatly to heart, dwelling on them more than on the rejections of any other children before or afterwards.

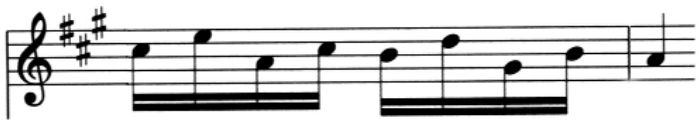
Once, Mr. Novak came to the house to pick up his wife, who had been visiting with Malvina. The radio was on, and someone was playing a sonata by Mozart.

"Listen," Josy called out. "That last line sounds exactly like the song 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town'!"

"Nonsense, that's impossible," Mr. Novak scoffed.

The very mention of Santa Claus seemed to make him uncomfortable.

The particular refrain was a signature phrase that Mozart typically used to wind up a musical composition. Josy had noticed it many times before.



"It's the same tune," she insisted.

But Mr. Novak scoffed "You don't know what you're talking about," he chided.

She tried humming the refrain for him. At that very moment, the radio echoed out the identical melody.

Caught unmistakably, Mr. Novak chuckled, a bit embarrassed. "Well, well, well" he laughed nervously. "Music detectives!"

He neither apologized nor praised her for an observation she considered insightful, and this made her feel slighted and cooled her interest in her religious school studies even further.

In her third year at the Arbeitering, she wrote a poem in Yiddish. Her parents were extremely proud, and Mr. Novak even posted her verse on the bulletin board, where it remained on display for several weeks. She started it with the words, "*Ich hob a breder Benny*" ("I have a brother Benny"), never realizing till years later that she was copying her mother's actual wording from an overheard conversation.

The following year, she asked permission to drop out of Yiddish shul. To her surprise, Malvina agreed without protest. Josy was pleased at the time. Years later, however, she regretted the decision, wishing that her parents had forced her to gain a stronger background in Judaism by continuing religious training a few years longer.

IX

Malvina's brother Ben had two daughters, Mary and Leah. Mary was nine years older than Josy, Leah two years older. Josy got to meet her cousins for the first time when she first arrived in Philadelphia. Whenever she visited their house, she saw little of Mary, who was by then already a teen-ager. Leah and Josy, though, sometimes played together. On one overnight stay at Leah's house, the two got into an argument. Aunt Liba, overhearing, took Leah aside.

"She's your guest!" Josy heard Liba scold. "You be nice to her. Remember, she's younger than you!"

After that, Josy always felt a special affection for Aunt Liba, despite the coolness that Malvina generally displayed towards her.

Liba whined unceasingly. Generally she had no trouble finding something to complain about. Her health was a favorite topic. Soon everyone learned not to ask Liba "How

are you?" because, as Jacques pointed out, she would actually tell you.

Josy's grandmother Dina lived with Malvina and Jacques for the rest of her days. Originally, everyone had expected that on moving to Philadelphia, Dina would take turns living alternatively with Malvina and Ben. But Dina, being crippled, needed continuous assistance to go to the bathroom during the night, and Liba refused to have any part in this. The few times Dina stayed at Ben's house proved unpleasant for everybody.

On one occasion, Malvina went to Ben's to bring Dina back after a one-week visit. The old lady was visibly upset. She called her granddaughter Mary into the room. Several weeks earlier, Mary, then seventeen, had come to Malvina complaining that her parents had no money to buy coal for heating the house. Malvina, hearing this, had given Mary sixty dollars.

"Show your aunt the coat that you bought with her money," Dina ordered.

Mary blushed and squirmed uncomfortably.

"Go ahead," Dina insisted. "Show her the coat that you bought with the sixty dollars she gave you for coal."

Mary must have boasted to Dina how she had outfoxed Malvina into giving her money, never realizing that her grandmother would disapprove and tell. It was a bitter moment for everybody.

Ben wholeheartedly supported his wife's refusal to have Dina stay with them. Still full of anger that his mother had sent him off to America at age eleven, he had never completely forgiven her. Now his bitterness seemed even greater. Dina's visits to his house grew less and less frequent.

Occasionally, Ben came alone to Malvina's. These visits always ended in an argument, each increasingly sharp. Once late at night Josy, already in bed, caught the sound of shouting from the kitchen. Horrified, she heard Ben scream, "Over my dead body will you live in my house!" while Malvina tried vainly to intervene.

Dina, 1934

These turned out to be the last words he ever spoke to his mother. After that night, he stopped coming altogether. Towards the end of her life, Dina became increasingly dejected. She was lonely and unwilling to learn English and, because of this, isolated. She had no friends of her own generation living close by, and she grew extremely depressed over her rejection by her two sons Ben and Stashek. She spent her days sitting for hours at the corner window in the dining room, staring down into the street. Her only diversion consisted in watching the occasional passerby outside.

The only reading she ever did was of the Jewish newspaper *The Forwards*, which Jacques occasionally managed to get for her. Usually Malvina had to help her to the bathroom, since Dina could hobble along only with difficulty. They had no car, so travel and outings were impossible. The only time Dina got out of the house was during summer when the family went to Wildwood. Here she sat outside on the open porch for hours, watching the sea a couple blocks away just as, in Philadelphia, she watched the street.

That summer in Wildwood they rented a third-floor apartment in an old building. Late in the season the yearly northeaster came. These heavy storms usually hit the Jersey coast during the last two weeks of August. The streets flooded so heavily that many people traveled around the town by rowboat.

Josy got one of her severest ear infections ever. Lying on her cot in the living room, she tossed in pain. To make matters worse, the day before she had read in the comic strip "Hairbreadth Harry" how Rudy, the ferocious villain, had tied the blonde heroine Belinda to the railroad tracks and was gleefully watching the approach of an oncoming train. Josy, feverish, was sure that Belinda would never make it, which increased her torment. She thrashed in misery as her fever grew higher.

Malvina had managed to order medicine from the local drug store, convincing the grocer who delivered her weekly food order to pick it up and bring it along with the groceries. They all waited impatiently. Torrents of rain beat down unmercifully, growing heavier by the minute, pounding the walls and roof. Finally, the delivery boy arrived. Lugging the groceries, he climbed up to the third floor and rang the bell. Wondering who would venture out in such a storm, Dina got up out of her bed and came limping into the living room. At that very moment, just as Malvina opened the front door, the ceiling in Dina's bedroom collapsed. Huge pieces of plaster, nails, and planks of wood came crashing down onto her bed. Dina burst into tears. Badly shaken, she hugged the delivery boy.

"He saved my life," she told Malvina in Yiddish. "He saved my life. If not for him, I would have been in that bed! Tell him I thank him, I thank him!"

The next day the weather began to clear. The sun came out, the waters in the street receded, Josy's ear infection began to subside and, in that day's issue of *The Public Ledger*, Hairbreadth Harry pulled Belinda off the tracks to safety just seconds before the train came rushing by.

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That November, before Josy turned eleven, Dina died. Josy was outside roller-skating with her friends after school. It was almost five o'clock when she rolled back to the apartment building, and parked outside she saw an ambulance. Then attendants came out, carrying a stretcher. Malvina followed. When she spotted Josy, she rushed her into the apartment of the first-floor neighbors, the Kanigs, asking them to let Josy stay there until Jacques got home a half-hour later.

Malvina had gone to the grocery store to buy a few last-minute items for supper. Returning, she had found Dina unconscious in the bathroom. Apparently she had taken an overdose of pills from the medicine cabinet.

When Jacques arrived and found out what had happened, he packed a small suitcase for Josy, called a cab, and dropped her off at the Novaks. "Please keep her for the next couple days," he begged hurriedly, then got back in to the taxi and continued on to the hospital. Dina died there at the Jewish Hospital at York and Tabor Roads the next day, November 15h.

The Novaks were especially kind to Josy. She slept in a twin bed next to Ruth's, staying for three days. Whenever she asked about her grandmother, they changed the subject. Nobody wanted to explain anything. After the funeral, Jacques came to take her home. He said nothing about the situation and, sensing her parents' discomfort, she avoided ever mentioning anything about the subject.

Eventually, she was able to piece together a few facts from bits of overheard conversation. At the hospital, Malvina had falsified Dina's age, claiming she was only sixty-five. She feared that, if they that knew Dina was actually in her mid-eighties, they might refuse to admit her or give her good care. Malvina remained at her bedside until Dina died. During her last hours, her mother thanked Malvina for all her devotion and care throughout the years. Malvina had been the only one of her children remaining with her until the very end.

They buried her at Montefiore Cemetery. The gravestone erected a year later would read “Dina Margulis, November 16, 1934”. (For some reason her records had listed the date of her burial rather than the date of her death.) At Malvina’s request, the Sokoloffs searched for and finally located Ben. He was living in West Philadelphia at a new address, and had no phone. Simon Sololoff finally managed to find him at work at Wanamakers Department Store. In this way Ben learned of his mother’s passing.