

Chapter 12. Grade 6

I

Malvina and Jacques continued to miss their friends from Chicago. They talked about them constantly, and kept up a steady correspondence. Nobody they had met in Philadelphia seemed to measure up to these friends from their past.

Daniel and Rosella Berkowitz were among the first people they had met when coming to Philadelphia. Because Rosella sang semi-professionally on a radio program called “The Jewish Hour”, Malvina fancied her a musician. Wanting to replace Mr. Connor with a new piano teacher for Josy, she followed Rosella’s recommendation and hired Mr. Katz. Mr. Morris Katz was a bachelor in his fifties. Sour-faced, tall, and uncommonly skinny, with bent-over posture both standing and seated, he gave the impression of unforgiving displeasure with the world. Straight black hair hung limply over his eyes, and his black-



Horn and Hardart Automat.

rimmed glasses with thick lenses barely concealed his squint.

Not once during the two years that she studied with Mr. Katz did Josy ever see him smile. His attitude toward life could best be described as dour. Most of the time he sat glumly through each lesson, occasionally muttering to himself. Once in a while he would mumble a correction to Josy's fingering. Generally he seemed lost in thought. In addition to scales, arpeggios, and finger exercises by Czerny, the only piece he ever gave her during those two years was Mozart's "Sonata in C Major". Lessons were frightfully dull.

One time a woman had asked Mr. Katz if her eight-year-old son should take violin lessons. Eyeing the youngster dubiously, Mr. Katz finally mumbled, "Better you should kill him first!"

The only thing that made Josy's lessons endurable was the location of Mr. Katz's studio at the back of the third floor in the Presser Building at Seventeenth and Chestnut. After each Saturday morning session, she spent most of the afternoon downtown. At the Horn and Hardart Automat on Sixteenth and Chestnut she ate lunch, then went to see a first-run movie. The ham sandwiches on rye bread or roll were what she looked forward to. She topped them with so much mustard that Malvina called them "mustard sandwiches with ham". A small ramekin of creamed spinach and the famous Horn and Hardart baked beans completed her meal. Anticipation of this weekly treat helped her get through the piano lessons.

One time walking with her father from the bus stop at Broad Street up Chestnut to her lesson, Jacques happened to whistle the following tune:



“Berlioz wrote some nice things,” he remarked.

“That’s not Berlioz. That’s Bizet,” Josy countered.

Jacques disagreed, and Josy argued so strongly against him that they finally decided to bet five dollars on it. Stopping into Pressers Music Store before going upstairs for her lesson, they approached the sales counter.

“Do you happen to know what this tune is?” Jacques asked the clerk, and whistled it for him.

“Sure, that’s the start of the ‘L’Arlesienne Suite’ by Bizet,” the fellow answered.

Jacques said he would never forget the broad grin on Josy’s face as he handed her the promised five dollars.

That first year with Mr. Katz, either Malvina or Jacques would take her into town for her lesson. By the second year, however, they allowed her to go by herself. She took the C bus to Broad and Chestnut, then walked the three blocks to Seventeenth. It was fun peering into the elegant shops on Chestnut Street, especially the windows at Bonwit Teller, always decorated so artistically.

When she first started taking lessons from Mr. Katz, Malvina decided it was time to buy a “serious” piano. They went in search of a baby grand. Eventually they settled on an established piano shop on Chestnut at Twenty-second Street. Mr. Hertzberg, the owner, waited on them himself. A kindly old gentleman, white-haired and soft-spoken, he seemed to take great personal interest in them. He chatted at length with Malvina over the course of several separate visits while Josy stood by in silence, awed by the impressive concert-grand pianos in the showroom. Mr. Hertzberg, eyes smiling through thick glasses, once confided that his grandfather had actually been a student of “the great Mendelssohn”.

They finally decided on a Kranich and Bach baby grand. The price was close to two thousand dollars, a respectable sum. Mr. Hertzberg assured Malvina that she would never regret this decision. The keyboard had a beautiful touch and, later, every piano tuner who would ever come to the house commented on its magnificent tone. That piano stayed with Josy for the next twenty years, and when she finally sold it she wept, feeling as if she had lost a member of the family.

II

After Dina died, Malvina hired nineteen-year-old Trixie Wexler to stay with Josy when she and Jacques had to go out in the evening. Trixie and Josy soon grew close, and before long Josy came to regard the young woman as her big sister.

Trixie had been orphaned in early childhood. She and her brother had been brought up by a distant relative to whom neither felt especially close. They were extremely poor, and she had no one to turn to in time of trouble. The relative who had brought them up had distanced herself from them as soon as they both got out of high school.

Always one to feel compassion for the disadvantaged, Malvina's heart went out to Trixie. She fussed over her, assuring her that she should now consider herself part of the Feldmark family. Making it a point to always pay her generously, Malvina frequently invited her to stay for dinner and included her in holiday celebrations. She would invent excuses to give Trixie little gifts whenever she found an opportunity. Trixie came to feel completely at home and comfortable there, and would often drop in unexpectedly to visit and stay for dinner.

One afternoon, she appeared unannounced and burst into tears. She had just come from the doctor, she said, and he told her she needed to have her appendix out. Surgery was scheduled for the following week. She lacked money to pay for hospitalization and medical costs, and furthermore, she sobbed, she had no place to go afterwards to recuperate.

Malvina quickly invited her to come straight from the hospital and remain with them as long as she needed to recuperate. She offered to defray some of the medical expenses and refused to take "no" for an answer. Trixie hugged her warmly, intensely relieved and grateful.

She had her operation the following week. A few days later Malvina arrived at the hospital in a taxi to bring Trixie home. There she recuperated for the next six weeks. In the beginning she had to remain in bed. Malvina sponge-bathed her every day, washing her feet, bringing her meals in bed, cooking special dishes to tempt her appetite. Josy watched in appreciation as her mother put her heart into caring for Trixie as if she were her own daughter. The weeks flowed pleasantly by. Trixie gradually regained her strength. Malvina continued to wait on her, never allowing her to make her bed or even wash her own laundry.

Finally Trixie's brother came to take her home. He arrived after supper and stayed for tea and dessert. As they got ready to leave, Josy began to cry loudly and bitterly. Her

sobs increased as he picked up Trixie's suitcase, heading for the door. Trixie kissed everybody good-bye, gave Josy an extra squeeze, and followed him out. Josy's weeping grew ever louder; the sound of her wails followed Trixie all the way downstairs to the street.

They heard not a word from Trixie for an entire year. As suddenly as she had come into their lives, she disappeared. No note of thanks, no phone call or letter confirming that she had even gotten home safely ever reached them. Since Trixie had no telephone, and they were unclear about her exact address, they had no way to inquire after her. Josy was heartsick, Malvina distraught with disappointment. It particularly hurt Josy to see her mother ignored after all she had done for this young woman who had been little more than an acquaintance just months before.

"Especially," Malvina told Jacques, "since, when she left, Josy was crying so hard. Trixie couldn't help but see how upset she was. Wouldn't you think she would at least have been concerned about that and called?"

Over a year later, while Malvina was walking in center-city, unexpectedly she ran into Trixie.

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Feldmark!" Trixie chirped brightly. "How have you been?"

She offered not a word about her disappearance, the long silence, or any thanks for the generous care she had received. Malvina was sick at heart. For years afterward she remained bitter about it all.

Years later, shortly after Malvina died, Josy would happen to meet Trixie again, this time at the home of a mutual acquaintance. She lightly greeted Josy as if nothing had happened. Josy, fresh from the grief of her mother's death and vividly remembering Malvina's anguish at the heartless way Trixie had behaved, remained furious at her indifference and her lack of appreciation and consideration. Angrily, she cut Trixie off in mid-sentence and turned her back on her. Never had she deliberately done this to anyone before, but now it gave her some sense of closure in helping avenge the pain Trixie had caused Malvina several years earlier.

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Miss Schneider, Josy's teacher in sixth grade, an older lady with dark hair beginning to turn white, was very experienced with children and loved her students dearly. She dressed in a matronly fashion: black dresses, long skirts almost to her ankles, dark oxford

shoes with laces tied intricately with huge knots. Her graying hair was held back by combs in a bun at the nape of her neck. She always treated her pupils seriously but sympathetically, and they regarded her as a grandmotherly figure. She spoke gently, though always in firm tones, and she allowed no mistake, however slight, to go uncorrected.

Flag Day that year was warm and balmy, so all the children were taken outside into the schoolyard for the ceremony. Twenty veterans in World War I uniforms stood at attention near the steps of the building, stiffly lending an air of dignity to the proceedings. A few of the officers climbed onto a temporary platform and made speeches, dealing mostly with battles they had experienced. One shook a finger at the children and sternly pointed out that they were the beneficiaries of the sacrifices these men had made and the sufferings they had endured in the war.

“We all fought so that you will never have to go to war!” the old soldier croaked out as he pointed to his comrades. “We fought in a war to end all wars!”

Everyone gaped as three elderly soldiers, resplendent in their medal-covered army jackets and leaning on canes, were assisted up onto the bandstand. These were veterans from the Spanish-American War. They made no speeches, simply sat through the ceremony, gazing out at the crowd in the schoolyard, lending an air of history to the event.

Finally a bugle played, and the children were dismissed back indoors to their classrooms, while the principal and several faculty members closed in around the visitors to talk further. Josy mused about this for days, in awe that she had actually seen soldiers from a war of another century.

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At the end of January 1936 it was time to leave Birney and move on to Cooke Jr. High. Josy was terrified. Older children in the neighborhood had spread word that incoming freshmen (or ‘freshies’, as they referred to them) would be in for severe taunting.

“They say,” Josy told her father in awe, “that there is a lunchroom in the school, and they even put cockroaches into the food of the ‘freshies’!”

Jacques laughed heartily, but no amount of reassurance or scoffing could allay her fears.

On the last day at Birney, Miss Schneider lined the children up. Then she said goodbye to each one personally. Kneeling down, she clasped each child to her breast weeping

audibly, kissing them repeatedly, wishing them well.

One day some twenty-five years later, while Josy was visiting her husband's cousin Flo Ellenberg who lived a few blocks from Birney School, she idly mentioned to the couple from next door that she had once gone to Birney. As they talked about the school, the woman announced that she knew Miss Schneider well.

“She used to be my teacher!” Josy cried. “How is she?”

“Well, she's retired by now,” the woman answered. “But about two years ago, she got married! For the first time, mind you! She was well into her late sixties already. It was his second marriage, but her first. And they're both very, very happy!”

It gave Josy intense delight to hear about this dear lady again, and to learn that she had found such happiness so late in life.