Chapter 6. Summer Vacations, 1930-1931

I

The first summer after moving to Philadelphia, Malvina and Jacques discovered the summer resort of Wildwood, New Jersey. In those days the town was sparsely populated. They loved the place from the first minute they saw it: the exceptionally wide beaches with tremendous expanses of sand between water and boardwalk, the quiet uncrowded atmosphere of the small streets with their charmingly gardened houses and hydrangea bushes, the small boardwalk only a few miles long.

They decided to rent a room there for the summer. Malvina and Josy stayed during

July and August, and Jacques came in by train every weekend and for his two weeks of vacation.

This became a yearly routine that, with few exceptions, would continue for more than a decade. Late each spring, Malvina took the train to Wildwood for the day and walked from one boarding house to another in search of a room they would rent for the coming summer. Frequently she passed houses that openly displayed signs reading, "No Jews or Irish". Despite this, she always managed to find a place that offered welcome and friendly accommodations.

Wildwood was a charming town. In the 1930s it still remained spacious and airy, off the beaten track, uncrowded, an ideal family resort. Its boardwalk began in North Wildwood and continued for about eight blocks with no stores at all, only an open wooden walkway with a few scattered benches facing the sea. As it approached the center of town, hotels, shops, and amusement areas began to appear, and the boardwalk gradually came alive. Suddenly one would be surrounded by vacationers riding in rolling carriages pushed by unsmiling, burly men, their shirt sleeves rolled up, many wearing hats to protect them from the sun, their eyes staring unseeingly out into the crowds. Everywhere there were noisy casinos; auction houses; vendors hawking cotton candy, French fries, popcorn, and hot dogs; restaurants, some elegant, others little more than closed-in booths smelling of grease; and stores, their window-sills piled high with box after box of salt-water taffies. The cries of bidding and haggling from an occasional auction house floated out over the boardwalk and mingled with the whine of organ-grinder music and the hubbub of the crowds. Seated on beach-chairs planted in front of exotic, curtained booths sat fortune-tellers, turbaned, beckoning the strollers to come in for a reading by palm, cards, or crystal ball.

The clamor and activity peaked in a section where the main boardwalk branched off into an arcade. This, too, was crowded with amusement houses, slot machines, Ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds, and innumerable rides. The whole place was a child's wonderland, and Josy adored it. She was usually able to convince her parents to take her to this part of the boardwalk on Saturday nights.

A couple of miles past the center of town, the boardwalk crossed Montgomery Avenue, and there the built-up area suddenly ended. For the last mile there was nothing but empty wooden walkway, sand and sea. Then at the spot where the boardwalk abruptly stopped, Wildwood Crest began. Here, as far as the eye could reach lay nothing but ocean and a vast expanse of beach to one side and, on the other, scattered among the wide-

ly spaced, empty streets, a few isolated houses.

Both areas away from the center of town (the Crest at one end and North Wildwood at the other) were the places Malvina loved best. On warm evenings, she would take Josy and sit on a bench facing the ocean to watch the waves wash in and the seagulls soar as it got dark. They relaxed together and talked as the moon came up over the water. It was only on weekends, after Jacques arrived, that they walked to the downtown section of the boardwalk to see the hubbub where the crowds mingled with the vendors in the arcade.

A long wharf extended from the boardwalk into the sea. This was Ocean Pier. For a single entrance fee of thirty-five cents, one could remain all day and evening, enjoying countless activities. Two movie houses presented full-length feature films, sometimes even double billings, and the titles changed almost every day. A vaudeville show and a small circus with pony rides drew large crowds. One could wander in and out of booths containing slot machines and shooting galleries. There were several curio shops and restaurants where one could buy everything from ice cream, pretzels, and French fries in paper cones to a full four-course meal. Having paid the entrance fee, it was possible to take an unlimited number of rides on any of the twenty or thirty different attractions: the whip, the Ferris wheel, the merry-go-round, the tea-cup, and several other rides with imaginative names. Ocean Pier was the ideal place to spend a rainy day. Every summer Josy would manage to visit the pier at least once or, if she was lucky, twice during the season. She considered this the highlight of her vacation.

It was small wonder that Wildwood was such a favorite with both children and adults. For those who preferred quiet and serenity, there were the rows and rows of uncluttered clapboard dwellings that lent a sense of tranquillity to an otherwise noisy town. During the 1930s, there were some streets with no buildings at all. Here, for several blocks at a stretch, one could see nothing but uninhabited patches of sand, each block hemmed in on all four sides only by cracked pavements. On these abandoned stretches grew weeds and occasional strawberry bushes. The effect was one of serenity, privacy, and spaciousness that lent a soothing charm to the remote little town.

Wildwood had just one trolley line, which connected the Crest with North Wildwood. The entire ride covered only four or five miles and, if one planned it carefully, this could take only an hour each way. However, only four vehicles operated on the line. Midway into town was a junction where one car had to wait until the trolley from the opposite direction arrived. Then, like partners in a dance, each vehicle would glide around the half-circle of the loop, freeing space for the other to continue on its course. Often one

trolley would stand idly, sometimes waiting for as long as three-quarters of an hour for its opposite number to appear. Josy usually found it more practical to finish the trip on foot. It was faster to walk from one end of town to the other than pay the five cents and wait endlessly for a ride.

Over the years she grew to love the place intensely. She got to know the town so well that she claimed to recognize every crack in the pavement. As a little girl she would run to the beach to kiss the sand, the ocean, and the boardwalk posts good-bye as her parents packed to leave for home at the end of the season. When she was older she would meet Shirley and Millie Granoff in Wildwood, sisters who would became her dear lifelong friends, and this, together with the charm of the town, further enhanced her memories of the place.

II

In 1931, somebody told the Feldmarks about Eichlin's Farm, an old farmstead near Quakertown, Pennsylvania that rented rooms to guests. When Malvina heard how little they charged for a room and three meals a day, she decided to try it for a summer vacation.

The place was a large, old rambling building with a wide front porch and guest-rooms on the second floor. The farmhouse sat at the turn of a shady country road lined with trees. Just across the road, hiding a small creek behind it, stood an old mill. Here the Eichlin family ground wheat from the nearby fields. A wooden fence separated the front lawn of the house from the road and, just inside the fence, grew a huge, gnarled old tree. From its branches hung a pair of thick ropes attached an old automobile tire. The children, both of guests and the farmer, took turns swinging in the shade all day long.

Behind the house lay a barn and hen houses. Once, Josy went with the farmer's children to collect eggs. The loud cackling of the hens, beating their wings wildly, horrified her as she watched the birds peck frantically at the hands reaching into their nests to collect eggs for waiting baskets.

"How awful!" she thought, "to take baby chicks away from their mothers, even before they're hatched!" She never went back to the hen houses after that and, gradually, she came to dislike many of the other activities of the farm.

The Eichlins served enormous meals. For breakfast, mid-day dinner, and supper, boarders gathered around a long table in the huge dining room. Here large windows over-

looked the adjoining field where cattle grazed. Regardless which meal of the day it was, the farmer's wife brought in platter after platter, each piled high with home-cooked country food, too much for one person to consume at a single sitting. Malvina, though, insisted that she taste everything and clean her plate. When she balked, her mother demanded that Josy remain in the dining room long after mealtime was over. She spent many an afternoon sitting there alone, her mouth full of unswallowed food, toying with her plate and gazing wistfully out the window. Occasionally she was still there when they began setting up for the next meal. From time to time, Malvina would glance in to check on her until, finally satisfied that no more food could be ingested, she gave permission for her to leave.

There was little for guests to do at the farm. Most visiting families stayed only for a few days. One family had two little girls, seven and nine, and the older one regaled the children with stories of how she had been accepted to perform in a New York show. This family soon left too, and the owner's children were kept busy with farm chores, making it impossible for Josy to spend time with them. Jacques came only one weekend while they were there, bringing with him a book of arithmetic problems for her to practice on, to "prepare her for the hard third grade work" that was coming next term.

"She goes through the functions all right," he complained to Malvina, "but she just doesn't understand how to set up the problems."

Josy was scarcely thrilled to be working on arithmetic during the vacation months. She tried to tackle a few of the problems just to please her father, but made little progress.

The days flowed idly by. One afternoon, everybody walked across the road to visit the old mill and watch the huge bundles of wheat being ground into flour. Another time, somebody with a small truck came to visit, and they all got a ride into Quakertown, where they looked in on a country fair and bought souvenirs. The days continued hot and sticky, and there was little to do. Malvina also grew bored and restless. There was no swimming pool in the area, not even a lake nearby where they could cool off. By the end of July she finally decided that it was time to return to Philadelphia.

III

At Brown Instrument Company Jacques had met Harry Rolnick, the one other Jewish engineer working there. He liked Harry very much and several times invited him to come for dinner with his wife and their two-year old son Jerry. Before long, the two

Harry and Lillian Rolnick with baby Jerry.

families became good friends.

Lillian was a lovely and charming woman and Jerry a plump and endearing child. Later Lillian confided to Malvina that, because of unspecified gynecological problems, her doctor had warned her never to become pregnant again. She continuously cuddled Jerry, often stopping suddenly in mid-sentence to grab and kiss him without restraint. Later, Malvina would look back on this as a premonition (Lillian did become pregnant two years later and died in childbirth). But at the time everyone who watched her hug the child was touched by the young mother's fierce display of affection for her son.

Harry was shy and boyish in nature. Tall and self-effacing, he reminded everybody of the film star Gary Cooper. He often invited the Feldmarks for a ride in his car. They spent many summer evenings and weekends together, going out on small excursions and once to the Pocono Mountains for a weekend together. Malvina later recounted how on one hot summer evening, Lillian snuggled up coyly against Harry and, gazing soulfully up at him, pleaded wistfully, "Harry, buy me an ice cream cone?"

"He's so shy," she confided to Malvina, who saw in this small incident how romantic and affectionate Lillian was.

As time passed, the two families grew ever closer. The Rolnicks came often for dinner, and Harry, though generally a quiet, gentle soul, sometimes burst unexpectedly into song, entertaining the children with this rousing ditty:

"Oh, my grandpa has long whiskers,
He keeps them neat as hay,
They hide the dirt on Granpa's shirt
They're always in the way.

Oh, they're always in the way,
The cowsy dim of hay,
They hide the dirt on Granpa's shirt
They're always in the way!"

One day Harry announced that for his forth-coming two-week vacation, he planned

to take his family to New York's Catskill Mountains for a camping trip.

"I saw an ad," he mentioned. "A woman near Kingston will let us camp in the meadow next to her house. She won't charge us much, and she'll let us use the facilities."

After returning from an exploratory weekend visit there, he waxed enthusiastic about the place and planned to leave for vacation there in mid-August.

"By the way," he added as an after-thought, "she only lives there in the summer. The rest of the year she teaches school in Chicago."

"Chicago," remarked Malvina. "What's her name?"

"Mrs. Ostrofsky," answered Harry.

A stunned silence followed. Then Malvina cried out, "I'm coming right with you!" Mrs. Ostrofsky, it turned out, had been a friend of hers during her years in Chicago!

She wrote to Mrs. Ostrofsky immediately and, a few days later, received a warm invitation to come with the Rolnicks and stay in the house as her guest. Jacques had already used up his two weeks of vacation at Eichlin's Farm, so Malvina and Josy had to go alone. The following week the Rolnicks, their car packed full of camping equipment, piled Malvina and Josy into the back rumble seat and headed for upper New York State. They expected to be away for two weeks.

The trip was close to two hundred miles and took them almost ten hours by car. Mrs. Ostrofsky's place turned out to be an old cottage nestled deep in the mountains. Located on a winding dirt road, it sat about one mile outside the remote hamlet of Oliveria, which was twenty miles past the city of Kingston and completely isolated.

When they arrived, Mrs. Ostrofsky greeted them with open arms. It was a warm and happy reunion for her and Malvina. The Rolnicks immediately set about pitching their tent outside in the enormous open field at the side of the house, while Malvina and Josy were given a small bedroom on the second floor of the cottage.

The house stood alone in a meadow, walled in closely by tall mountains, entirely cut off from the nearby town. It was small, its front porch standing squat against the road, across from which a steep mountain rose sharply. On this slope Josy occasionally glimpsed a red fox or two darting through the sparse blades of grass. In back of the house no more than fifty feet away, rose another mountain, this one completely blocking the view from the west. At its base, all but hidden by a thick clump of trees, she eventually discovered a tiny brook only a few feet wide. Here she idled away many quiet hours.

Mrs. Ostrofsky and Malvina spent days of endless talk, catching up on events since the Feldmarks had left Chicago. Now a widow, Mrs. Ostrofsky explained that she spent

every summer in this remote spot, which she loved as a respite from her teaching job. Her two sons were in their late teens, and the younger, Efrem, was living with her at the cottage that summer. Once, he regaled everybody with an account of a fire that had broken out in their Chicago apartment the winter before. Mrs. Ostrofsky had been out for the evening. Upon her return she found the place already evacuated, the building entirely surrounded by fire engines and police trucks.

"Don't worry, Ma'am," a fireman assured her as she rushed over frantically. "There's not much damage, and we got everybody safely out of the building."

"But where is my baby?" she screamed. "I don't see my baby!"

Before the fireman could turn to reenter the building, seventeen-year-old Efrem sauntered up. Still zipping his jacket closed, he smiled at the firemen and announced sheepishly, "It's all right! She means me!"

On one side of the summer cottage grew a dense wood, thick with wild ferns. On the other lay the meadow where the Rolnicks camped. Sometimes Josy spread a blanket out on the grass there and read. Unfortunately, all that she had brought with her was one book, *Mr. Wind and Madame Rain*. It was hardly the most interesting of books, but she had no other and there was little else to do. As she read and reread it, she found to her surprise that she gradually came to enjoy it.

At the brook she spent long hours sitting on the ground in the shade of tall trees, watching tiny fish flick through the water. Once she idly built a miniature dam of pebbles and inadvertently trapped two minnows in it. These she kept imprisoned for about half an hour, watching them swim round and round in small circles, unable to escape from the small wall of encircling stones. Finally, bored, she removed one pebble, creating an exit point for the fish to leave. After breaking through the small barricade, one minnow swam around and around several times until the other also broke free. Then the two disappeared together into the ripples.

"What a wonderful show of friendship!" she thought. "They grew attached to each other because they were both trapped in the same prison. Even fish can make friends and band together when they share hardships."

The weeks passed quietly. Because they were so deep into the mountains, the weather felt cool and pleasant, even though it was the height of summer. There was little to do except take long walks along the empty dirt road, picking ferns and trying to spot wild birds. Two or three times they walked to the village a mile away, where they bought chewing gum in a flavor called "tea-berry" and watched a couple of old men sit on the

stoop of the country store whittling sticks of wood.

Late in August came an eclipse of the sun. Everybody went outside to watch, holding in front of their eyes smoky pieces of glass they had prepared earlier over an open fire.

A day or two before the Rolnicks were ready to leave, a letter arrived from Jacques with the news that an epidemic of infantile paralysis had broken out in Philadelphia. All public schools would remain closed until October, and parents were advised to keep their children out of the city. Malvina, recalling that the Grodskys' daughter Masha had caught polio at a very young age, decided to keep Josy in Oliveria. She convinced Mrs. Ostrofsky to accept a small payment and let them stay for another month after she left to return to her teaching job in Chicago. When the Rolnicks departed, Malvina and Josy found themselves alone in the cottage with a young couple from Brooklyn and their infant daughter who had come up for September to enjoy autumn in the mountains. They were delighted to have company in the house. They even promised Malvina a ride back as far as New York City when it came time to leave at the end of the month.

September passed very slowly. Occasionally Josy sang to the infant girl, but there was little else to do. It got colder every day, and the nights were so chilly that they had to sleep in socks and sweaters under several blankets. Nobody ever passed along the road, and the young couple would depart for long outings and come back only at sundown. As the time approached for everybody to leave, they found themselves growing more impatient each day.

At last the time for departure arrived. Several people from the village drove over to help close the cottage and say good-bye. Everyone stood amid piles of luggage scattered on the floor, chatting idly while they waited for the Brooklyn man to finish loading his car.

Suddenly his wife, with the infant in her arms, took a step forward and tripped over the suitcase in front of her. Instinctively clutching the baby to her breast, she smashed face first into a large bureau. Screaming in pain she passed the child to one of the villagers while the others helped her up. She kept shrieking in agony, her nose streaming blood, but the baby, fortunately, was uninjured.

They managed at last to stench the bleeding by stuffing wads of cotton into her nostrils. Someone bandaged her face and she was assisted into the front seat of the small car. Her husband handed her the baby, then helped Malvina and Josy climb awkwardly into the rumble seat at the back. The rumble seat was crammed with a collapsed baby carriage, high chair, bassinet, small pieces of furniture, and numerous bundles. Malvina and Josy huddled together at one side as they set out for New York City.

The earlier mood of excitement and exhilaration was now completely gone. The day was sunny but bitterly cold, and a brisk wind whipped about them both as they sat, cramped together in the crowded outdoor space. They rode in silence for almost six hours. Through the back window of the car they could glimpse the family inside, but it was impossible to communicate with them. When they finally arrived in New York City, depressed and chilled, the man dropped them off at the railroad station in Manhattan; from there they took a train the rest of the way home to Philadelphia. Later they learned that the woman had suffered a fractured nose. It had been a dreary journey and afterwards, because of it, Josy would always associate a rumble seat with a feeling of sadness and depression.