Chapter 8. Grade 3

I

Etka's adult sons lived with her and Abraham until the middle one, Morris, got married. He and his bride, Ann Susel, were among Malvina's favorite cousins on her father's side of the family, and they soon grew to be among Josy's favorites as well. Their wedding took place in Paterson in 1933, and Josy and her parents were invited.

Dozens of out-of-towners arrived, creating a shortage of beds in the houses and apartments of the local family. Jacques slept on a cot at the Rosens, while Malvina and Josy shared a bed with Helen Margolius, youngest adult daughter of Uncle Meyer. Josy tossed, turned, and kicked in her sleep so much that both her mother and Helen finally got out of bed to finish the night sleeping on the floor.

"What will you do when you get married?" Helen warned the eight-year-old.

Morris and Ann Rosen

"You'd better change by the time you grow up, or no man will ever want to marry you!"

Josy spent most of the wedding ceremony asking her parents questions. Why was the bride dressed in white? Why did the groom wear such a tall black hat? What was the Rabbi droning on about? Why were so many women crying if this was a happy occasion?

Jacques gave her short, terse answers, while Malvina glared at her and signaled her to be quiet. The rest of the evening bored her. She spent as much time as she could in the bathroom, dawdling over the sinks, splashing water through her fingers, and staring at the reflection of her hair, freshly done up by her mother in long curls that hung well below her shoulders. Neither the bride nor groom ever scolded her about all this afterwards, but prim and proper Cousin Doris Margolius carried the memory for decades to come. She chided Josy about this when they met again some fifty years later.

"My, what a bratty little kid you were!" were the first words she uttered on seeing Josy once more. "And what a nuisance!"

Years later, Ann Susel Rosen laughed when Josy told her about it.

"You were just a normal inquisitive child, my dear, what else?" she retorted. "And Doris has always been a prude!"

Ann and Morris also shared another memory with her.

"During Easter vacation just one year after our wedding," Ann recounted, "your mother brought you to Paterson to stay with us for a few days. That was before we had children of our own, and we loved having you with us. You were like our pet.

"Then one afternoon you came to me and asked, 'Do you by any chance have an attic?'

"'Yes,' I told you, 'Why?'

" 'Because,' you answered, 'in the *Nancy Drew* stories attics have all kinds of mysterious things in them. And at home I only live in an apartment, so I don't have an attic.

Do you think I could possibly see yours?'

"So I took you upstairs to the third floor," continued Ann, "where you feasted your eyes on all my junk. Then you came back downstairs completely satisfied, and you never mentioned another word about it again!"

Ann also recalled how she had prepared for her own wedding. She had gone to the bargain basement in a local department store and found a second-hand dress, which she transformed into an elegant gown with her sewing machine. The dress had cost her just ten dollars, and she still prided herself on this sixty years later.

II

Josy was now in Mrs. Daly's third grade class. Older students remembered Mrs. Daly as having had another married name. Then one morning she announced that the children were now to call her "Mrs. Huddy". At recess the children concluded that this must be her third marriage, her fourth change of name. It sounded exciting and mysterious, and some wondered if Mrs. Huddy might actually be a spy.

She was a pretty young woman with glasses, a bit officious but pleasant. She had soft carrot-colored hair and dressed stylishly, always in high-heeled shoes. The children liked her and especially enjoyed her demonstrations. Once, to explain how secondary colors were formed, she told a story about the blue fairy and the yellow fairy swimming together in a mountain lake. Using squares of pigment from a paint box, she dropped a blue one and a yellow one into a glass of water. Everyone oohed and ahed as they watched the water turn green. She repeated the process with blue and red to create purple, and, again with red and yellow to make orange.

Another time she referred to a six-foot chart of the human body at the front of the room, its skeletal, nervous, muscular, and circulatory systems each defined by a separate color. Midway through she left the room, saying that she would be gone for only a minute or two.

"Copy your spelling words from the chart while I'm gone, " she directed, "and remember, no talking! Not a single word!"

No sooner was she out of the room than pandemonium broke loose. A couple of boys jumped out of their seats and began running around the room. Another sprang up on a desk, waving the blackboard pointer and announcing that *he* would conduct the class.

Jacques and Josy, 1933

Most of those still sitting turned to their neighbors and began animated conversations.

Suddenly someone called out, "Here she comes!"

They all scrambled into their seats, but a few failed to make it in time.

"I'm disappointed in you," Mrs. Huddy scolded the class. "Now we're going to see how honest you are! All those who were talking while I was out of the room raise your hands."

No hands went up.

"Even if you said just one word!" she insisted.

Slowly, a couple of hands went up. One was Josy's. Earlier she had snapped out, "Stop it!" to the boy behind her who had taken the opportunity to pound her on the head. To her this meant that she had uttered at least one word. While the real culprits smiled angelically, Josy and a few others with raised hands each got a demerit.

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The only subject she hated that year was penmanship. Two or three times a week, everything stopped for a lesson in arm-movement. Posters hanging above every blackboard displayed perfectly formed *o*'s and *a*'s along with other well-rounded letters. Each desk had an inkwell in the upper right corner and a groove for a pen or pencil at the front

top of its slanted surface. At the start of the lesson, every child was given a sheet of lined paper, a wooden pen-holder, a metal pen-point to insert, a tiny chamois cloth to use as a wiper, and a small blotter. Then Mrs. Huddy began.

First, she stated the rules. There were over a dozen: sitting posture (straight back, feet flat on the floor), arm movement (from the shoulder rather than the hand), light pressure on the pen, attention to producing consistently symmetrical and well-rounded letters, keeping within the lines on the paper, etc. The same rules were repeated every time. Then a student (a different one for each lesson, usually somebody who had done well the previous day) was selected to walk around the room and paste a gold star on the paper of every child who correctly observed today's special rule (the choice remained a secret till the end of class, known only to the teacher and the child bestowing the stars). Mrs. Huddy hoped this would encourage everyone to strive in all the areas, but never once did Josy receive a star. She found it impossible to concentrate on all the rules at once, and it was uncomfortable to sit for long in an erect position, head high, spine straight, feet flat on the floor, writing arm swinging lightly in circles as it guided the sputtering pen along the page. The paper had to be kept from sliding by the other arm, which remained fixed in a "relaxed" position away from the body.

Finally Josy hit upon a strategy. No matter what happened, she would always keep her feet flat on the floor. This way, she reasoned, she would not be too uncomfortable, and eventually she would win a star at least once. As the days and weeks rolled by, however, even this simple plan failed to produce results. Finally, exasperated, she gave up on it. To her utter disgust, that very day "Feet flat on the floor" came up as the winning requirement.

Around this time Mrs. Huddy's class joined with the third grade class next door to learn William Wordsworth's poem "Daffodils". A team from a local radio station came to the school, pushed back the movable sashes that separated the classrooms, moved the children into the widened area, set up equipment and microphones in all the corners, and then precisely at 11:15 broadcast eighty children reciting the poem in one voice. At home, Malvina, Dina, and Celia Kirson, who was visiting at the time, sat glued to the set, glowing in pride that Josy's voice was one of the eighty coming from the speaker.

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In early March 1933, people all over the United States huddled in front of their radios listening to the inauguration of newly-elected President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As he was being sworn in for his first term in office, they heard his booming voice come ringing out, asserting that Americans had "nothing to fear but fear itself!" Josy sat cross-legged on the living-room rug in front of the large radio, listening wide-eyed to the powerful words, awe-struck at the confidence they inspired as they heralded an abrupt change in the mood of the country.

III

Her parents both played an active role in encouraging her to read. Through their suggestions she would grow familiar with the names of foreign authors she never heard mentioned in school. When she started third grade, Jacques established a routine that she came to love. Every Friday evening, as soon as he got home from work, he would walk with her the eight blocks to the public library at Old York Road and Windrim Avenue. Here they both borrowed books for the coming week.

While he was making his choices, she would go to one special corner in the children's reading room to select her own favorites. Most of the time these were collections of fairy tales, including *The Blue Fairy Book* and *The Red Fairy Book* (there was a collection for each color, and she savored them all).

Occasionally Malvina and Jacques also bought her books at Leary's Bookstore. This four-story building on Ninth Street between Market and Chestnut was a charming place with an outdoor stall much like those along the Seine in Paris. Among the books she got from there were the *Honey Bunch*, *Bobbsey Twins*, and *Nancy Drew* series, all of which were popular with children her age. Her favorite was the *Bunny Brown and His Sister Sue* set. She devoured these, reading the same ones over and over till she got to junior high school. She would especially enjoy them in the sixth grade on days when Malvina was away and Josy was finally allowed to come home and eat lunch in the apartment by herself. Then she sat at the kitchen table munching her food, oblivious to everything but the open book before her.

By the time she got to the end of elementary school, she had discovered such classics as *Hans Brinker or The Silver Skates*, *The Secret Garden*, and *Heidi*, which she particularly enjoyed if lunch consisted of a Muenster cheese sandwich. She imagined that

Heidi had eaten this same type of cheese while having her alpine adventures, and that made the sandwich taste even better.

IV

When she was eight, Josy's parents bought an upright Cunningham piano and started her on music lessons with Mr. Connor, a man in his early sixties. He rarely smiled, glaring at everyone over his steel-rimmed glasses, seldom saying anything positive about anything. Josy's early efforts at the piano caused him little joy.

He came to the house once a week. Sometimes between lessons he sent one of his more advanced students to supervise Josy's practicing. Beatrice was eighteen and had a very sweet disposition. She and Josy got along well. Josy felt sorry for Beatrice, since she came from a poor family and badly needed the fifty cents she got for each of these practice sessions.

Beatrice was the oldest of eight children. One day she arrived deeply dejected. One of her younger brothers had complained of stomach cramps, and her mother had given the little fellow castor oil. Now he was on his way to the hospital. Malvina paid Beatrice the fifty cents, canceled the session, and sent her home. The following week Beatrice returned, telling them that the little fellow had died on the way to the hospital from a ruptured appendix.

Beatrice was always patient with Josy, but Mr. Connor yelled at every wrong note. Sometimes he shrieked at the top of his lungs, while in the kitchen Dina, in a puzzled whisper, would ask Malvina, "*Far vuss shreit ehr azoy*?" ("Why is he shouting like that?")

As the lessons progressed into a second year, he took to slapping Josy across the fingers when she hit the same wrong note twice, sometimes using a ruler that he kept available to rap out the tempo. After three years of lessons with Mr. Connor, Malvina changed teachers.

V

Malvina had had problems with her sinuses since coming to Philadelphia, and she decided to have surgery. Their friends Daniel and Rosella Berkowitz highly recommend-

ed Dr. Barnblatt, who was connected with the Deborah Center in Lakewood, New Jersey, and their close personal friend. Dr. Barnblatt was fond of making weighty pronouncements, but these did little to inspire confidence in his patients. (Malvina later discovered that he had earned his medical degree at night school.) After several visits, he talked her into letting him operate on her sinuses.

She was so afraid of the surgery that she insisted the family have a professional photographer take portraits so they would remember her. The operation did little good. She continued to suffer from sinus discomfort and a post-nasal drip, and in addition often complained that the surgery had ruined her profile. Although her straight, classically Grecian nose now had a very slight bump at the bridge, she still remained a strikingly beautiful woman. The best thing to come out of the experience were the photographs, the best of her parents that Josy ever had. When Jacques took a picture, he spent so long getting the camera ready that his subjects usually came out squinting, glaring, or looking downright miserable.

Josy and Malvina, 1933.

Not long after the operation, Malvina's white blood count began to soar, and Dr. Barnblatt was unable to understand why. Eventually she decided to see Dr. Fitz-Hugh, who had examined Josy after her encounter with the school nurse. He placed Malvina into the hospital for observation and tests. The medical students and residents came to her bedside every day to observe this unusual patient, while their professors were unable to come up with a diagnosis. Her blood count gradually returned to normal, so they finally dismissed her, nonplused but gratified that she had improved.

About a week later the high white-blood count returned. Once again Dr. Fitz-Hugh put her into the hospital, and once

again the results were the same; her blood count gradually returned to normal. Again they discharged her, and once more the white-blood count soared. She returned to Dr. Fitz-Hugh in despair.

"I'm completely stumped by your case," he admitted. "We've tried every possible test, and I have no answer for you."

Malvina desperately tried to give him every bit of information she could think of. Begging him not to drop her case, she explained, "Doctor, I don't know where else to turn. I'll try anything you say. You should know that I have a very strong disposition. I'm very persistent by nature. I have so much will-power that I can even force myself to eat raw liver."

Dr. Fitz-Hugh drew himself up in his chair.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

Malvina explained how, after operating on her sinuses, Dr. Barnblatt had recommended that she build up her strength by eating daily portions of raw liver, a new discovery he had read about in a medical journal.

The flavor was so atrocious that she had had to send the family out of the room so she could steel herself for the ordeal. Ever resourceful and fiercely persistent, she had searched for ways to camouflage the taste. She had chopped the raw liver, spread it on a slice of bread, sprinkled it with orange or lemon juice and then, holding her nose, swallowed it.

"I've solved your case!" Dr. Fitz-Hugh exclaimed. "No wonder your white blood count is so high! They only give raw liver to anemia patients!

"And when you were in the hospital," he continued, "you stopped eating it. That made your blood count go back down. Then when you went home, you must have started eating it again, didn't you? And up again went the blood count."

It was a triumph for both doctor and patient. Malvina never went back to Dr. Barnblatt again. Dr. Fitz-Hugh became their family physician, and her blind faith in him lasted for the rest of her life.