Chapter 9. Grade 4

I

From fourth through sixth grades, Josy was in a “double class”. Fast-track learners from the first and second term of each grade were grouped together in a single classroom (4A with 4B, 5A with 5B, and 6A with 6B) and one teacher taught both pairs at the same time. For most activities she would assign a written lesson to one half of the class while she worked with the other. There were two promotions each year: at the beginning of February and the end of June. Each time they were promoted, students were reunited with those they had shared a classroom with a full year before.

Josy became friendly with Marion Barg when she met her again each autumn, when Marion once more became a B level student and Josy an A level one. Each year Marion got assigned the same seat directly behind Josy.

Marion used to scribble wonderful messages when she signed autograph books, which were then the rage in Grades Four, Five, and Six. Girls especially took tremendous interest in them. Carefully folding the pages into intricate patterns, each would boast about the number of signatures she had collected. The best books were those signed by the most people.

Usually students' messages merely read "Good luck!" while teachers just entered their names. Marion, however, regularly came up with something distinctive, a verse or prophecy or pithy saying. She allowed everyone to copy what she wrote and use it as their own, and Josy gladly availed herself of this offer. One of her personal favorites, which she got from Marion and later used quite liberally, was:

This great big world of ours
Is mighty hard to beat,
You get a thorn with every rose—
But aren't the roses sweet?

Another was especially popular as girls kept changing their cliques and social circles:

Friendship is like china,
Precious, rich and rare,
When broken can be mended
But the crack is always there.

Miss Bernstein was their teacher through both halves of the fourth grade. She was an older lady, much loved for her kindness and gentle manner, but she had one annoying habit. At least once a week, she would suddenly stop the lesson and demand undivided concentration from the class.

"We have a problem," she would announce. "I need the help of each and every one of you to solve it."

The students groaned, knowing what was coming. Plaintively, Miss Bernstein would continue.

"There just isn't enough time in the day! I have so much to teach you, and we just can't fit it all in! Now what shall I do? Who can tell me how to catch up? We're so far behind already! How can we save time? Does anyone have a suggestion?"

The first time this happened, a couple of the less timid raised their hands to offer advice. Hesitantly, they suggested that perhaps Miss Bernstein should stop the present discussion and get back to the work itself, but she simply brushed this off as inconsequential.

"Seriously," she whined, "I want to know."

Then, in despair, she waxed eloquent on the amount of time they were losing and how they were falling farther and farther behind each day.

The children looked at each other helplessly. These sessions lasted from fifteen minutes to half an hour each time. During this interval, everybody sat back and stared vacantly out the window while Miss Bernstein rambled on and on about the loss of time. If these moods came over her in the morning, the monologues were mercifully cut short by recess. In the afternoons, however, they usually extended until dismissal time at three thirty.

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In a test Miss Bernstein once asked students to name three foods that contain natural sugars.

"Carrots," Josy started to write, but Miss Bernstein interrupted.

"Now I don't mean cake," she warned. "And I don't mean ice cream. And I don't mean candy!"

"What about licorice?" one boy asked.

"No, not licorice either!" responded Miss Bernstein.

"What about fudge?" called another.

"That's candy," she replied.

"How about cookies?"

"No, not cookies!"

"What about pie?"

By this time Josy was completely distracted. All she could think of were the foods just mentioned. She left the rest of her answer blank.

Miss Bernstein did give her one point for the word "carrots".

"Carrots do have some sugar," she admitted. "But why didn't you just name some fruits?"

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Once Josy forgot to clean out the papers stuffed under her desk and, when Miss Bernstein collected composition books, she handed in everything without checking. On the back page was a poetic description she had started and forgotten weeks before about what an exotic country China must be. The teacher was enthusiastic about it, pouncing on this and returning the notebook with laudatory comments.

On another occasion, Miss Bernstein selected the class's best book report and read it aloud. As she listened, Josy recognized it as her own. She concluded that what must have impressed the teacher was her use of the word "portrays" in the sentence starting with "The author portrays the character as …" Otherwise, the report differed little from the way she generally wrote.

Later that year, they had an assignment on poetry. The topic was "Obedience". Josy turned in the following:

I must have obedience
For my mother dear,
Also for my father
And my teacher all the year.

Obedience makes me happy
In everything I do,
I always, always will obey,
Always, won't you?

It was the first poem she ever wrote. Miss Bernstein was almost delirious with joy on reading it.

"Now that's the way we should all behave, isn't it" she sang out to the class, which did little to increase Josy's popularity with her peers.

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On parent visitation day, Malvina came to school and joined a few other parents at the side of the classroom observing the lesson.

"Now what should you say to guests," Miss Bernstein asked the class, "when you are offering them food?"

"Take as much as you want," came Josy's instant reply.

"The correct answer," Miss Bernstein announced coolly, "is 'Help yourself!'"

Malvina said nothing, but later Josy overheard her commenting to Jacques, "That teacher should have at least praised her for being generous. I didn't like the way she handled the situation at all."

Josy's struggles over food remained ongoing. Every day, when she headed back to school after lunch, Malvina would hand her a banana to eat along the way. Eventually Josy felt nauseated by the very sight of a banana. Rather than argue with her mother, which she knew would be pointless, she meekly accepted the banana and then threw it away half a block from the house. Unintentionally she picked the same spot every day. Several weeks passed and the pile of unpeeled bananas beside the curb grew ever higher.

One afternoon Malvina, walking along Eleventh Street to do her weekly shopping, spotted the pile and realized what must be happening. Later that afternoon she confronted Josy, who was so taken aback that she admitted everything. From that time on, Malvina made sure Josy ate her daily banana at breakfast.

Another time it was raining hard when Josy left to return for the afternoon session. On the walk lying side by side in the mud, she spotted not one, but two wet shiny dimes. She scooped up the coins, then ran all the rest of the way to school. Although she arrived late, she remained the envy of her classmates as she held up both dimes for everyone to see when the teacher's back was turned.

II

One of the boys in 4B wrote a short play about Captain John Smith and Pocahontas. Miss Bernstein was delighted and announced that the class would act it out. Everyone felt that Josy should be Pocahontas. She was appalled at the suggestion. She hated to be singled out, and knew it was because of her two long braids that they associated her with an Indian girl. Every morning, Malvina braided her hair into two long plaits (except for special occasions when she arranged it into several long curls instead). Josy had already endured considerable teasing about her hair color, especially from some of the boys who called her "Carrots". Now this became even more unendurable.

One boy in particular, Arthur Fierman, had the same shade of hair as hers, a dark auburn. It annoyed them both when other children asked teasingly if they were brother and sister, or even boyfriend and girlfriend. They grew to hate each other, making a deliberate effort to keep their distance as much as possible.

Josy thought the color of her hair made her conspicuous. She longed for the day when she heard it would darken as she grew older! Her other classmates also often teased her about her plaits. Once even Alfred Sellers, who sat behind her and was generally well behaved, dipped one of her braids into the inkwell on his desk.

Josy hated the idea of standing up in front of the class with everyone's attention focused on her hair. The prospect almost paralyzed her with fright. She pleaded with Miss Bernstein to choose somebody else for the part, but the teacher refused. Each day Josy grew more miserable, and soon she could think of little else. She slept poorly, in real despair over the coming ordeal.

On the morning of the scheduled performance, even the hated penmanship lesson seemed pleasant. She wished it would never end.

Finally, the time arrived. Trembling she got up and managed to recite her lines in a quavering voice. When it was all over, a huge wave of relief and jubilation swept over her. Life seemed sweet again. Nobody had made fun of her; they didn't even mention her braids. Most of the children told her she had made a fine Pocahontas, and even Alfred Sellers (who had written the play) congratulated her. The relief was so great that she vowed she would never again allow herself to become so overcome with stage fright as on the day she played Pocahontas.

III

As he did every year, Ben Weintroub came from Chicago to visit. He was now an influential attorney, the successful publisher of the *Chicago Jewish Forum*, and President of the Decalogue Society of Lawyers. He made annual business trips to New York and usually he would stop and stay overnight on the way. Malvina always insisted that Josy sleep on the living room sofa so he could have her bed, since he snored loudly and, being heavy-set, required plenty of room to sleep comfortably.

On one occasion he was on his way home from a visit to the Soviet Union and unable to come to Philadelphia, so Malvina traveled to New York to see him. She stayed at a YWCA that permitted only women guests. When she met Ben at a restaurant for supper, he told her how painfully disappointed he was at what he had seen abroad, the disorganization, poverty and corruption instead of the idealism and prosperity he had expected from Russia's Five-Year Plan.

After dinner they went for a long walk, arguing heatedly as Malvina tried to convince him to reexamine his views. Conditions in the United States were extremely poor, and many idealistic people still looked to Europe for solutions. She felt it was wrong of him to spread a negative message. They walked for almost three hours, discussing and arguing.

They finally said goodbye back at her hotel, and after he left, she went up to her room chilled to the bone. Seeing just one thin blanket on her bed, she pulled out an additional one from the dresser drawer, but that, too, looked skimpy, so she phoned Room Service and asked for one more. They brought it, but it looked so thin that she asked for still another, and then yet another again. The maid looked at her oddly, but complied each time. Malvina ended up with six blankets on her bed. It took no more than one minute after getting under the covers for her to peel off the top blanket and then, one by one, all the others. She was amazed to find that each was one hundred percent wool, and so tightly woven that just one would have sufficed; she could even have used it outdoors as a winter coat.