One More for the Cause

The wind-up alarm clock did not need to ring the 9-year-old awake that first Hall morning. The bell had been echoing in his head all night long, chiming a fresh start in a new school. To the boy who dreamed of another chance, it tolled the anthem of a better world. Perhaps this time he could apply the lessons he had learned the hard Hill way and things would turn out differently.

Growing up in America isn't easy for any child who doesn't speak English, and Alex's situation in the 1950's was no exception. At first, in 1956, when he was almost 5 years old and enrolled in kindergarten at Hill Street Elementary School, he did know his basic "yesses" and "no's," "hellos," "goodbye's" and "thank you's." Later, as he grew his vocabulary, it would be "gaz" instead of "gas," "hahmbourgyer" instead of "hamburger," "rahdio" instead of "radio." He'd stutter for words, mispronounce the few he knew, and parade his foreignness for all to mark and assess. Perhaps it was through this inability to express even the little he understood that he often found himself on the contrary side of his peers and teachers, and in particular, the hard-crusted scrappers who seemed to take exceptional delight in signaling him out for critical consideration.

Brown-haired, grey-eyed, not too tall or too short, neither fat nor skinny, particularly handsome or ugly, Alex's features suited him for invisibility and his personality seemed to follow suit. His shyness might have appeared typical for some children of his age or interpreted as stubborn withdrawal. Not that he was by nature a sad or unhappy child. But he had learned to be wary and vigilant. His struggle with the English language, self-effacing as a 21-gun salute, spotlighted that he was unlike everyone else, and standing out for any reason, bad or good, checked his peace of mind. Many unpleasant schoolyard encounters had taught him to keep to himself. He simply wanted to join the popular crowd by learning the language as quickly as possible and be a kid like everyone else. But closeted in the tentative security of his jerry-rigged fortress of solitude, he felt the frustration and loneliness of a reclusive tenant whose key doesn't fit the lock of his own self-imposed prison.

By the mid-1950's, Senator Joe McCarthy and his crusaders had pulled off their hate-baiting tour de force like the Goebbelesque masters of propaganda that they were. Where cautionary foreboding had once simmered, scalding panic overflowed the melting pot's sides and threatened to extinguish the flame that had, as a historical matter of course, melded unity out of America's abounding disparates.

The Senator's campaign to uncover spies and other traitors lurking in the innocuous midst had aroused the mania of bigots predisposed to restoring the well-being the nation had supposedly enjoyed before the septic post-War tide of immigration rose and contaminated her privileged shores. Would-be Sons of Liberty and self-styled Daughters of the American Revolution added names to blacklists and blackballed the unwelcome; inflexible kneelers faithfully dusted off their Bibles and in the name of God vilified innocents who trespassed in their sacred places or worshipped in exotic shrines. Professed patriots oiled their guns, and fellow-traveling scallywags knotted their nooses. Intolerant irrationals all, justified by dogma and sham patriotism, they projected their fears and frustrations on folk who did not look or speak like them, the newly arrived, the dark-skinned, the followers of alternate paths, but especially on those among them who had the temerity to settle next door and commit the ultimate offense: the fouling of their blood line with profane foreign seed.

Their hatred was back in fashion. They were roused and ready. It was their moment to pounce.

Cast starkly in black and white, in the press, on television and in the movies, the 1950's displaced the living-color optimism of the post-War 40's with twilight shadings of noir grey. The relief

that came of the War's end had been short lived. America found itself in another war, the bleak Cold War this time, with its nuclear-armed nemesis the communist Soviet Union, the octopus formerly known as inconsequential tsarist Russia. Good citizens were on alert, and nobody felt secure. Children were being drilled to hide under their school desks for protection when the Russky nuclear missiles inevitably began to fly. Suburbanites were digging bomb shelters and preparing for annihilation or, if luck prevailed, the preservation of middle-class existence in a mutated wasteland. The decentry sided with McCarthy's extremists: America had to defend herself or be eradicated.

And so, the huddled masses had reached Hill's teeming shores and encountered its hostile, its small-minded malfeasants. To them, the first American-born child of post-War Russian immigrants was as noticeable as a three-legged dog. But being far less likely to receive a pat for his head, Alex learned early on to disappear into any available backdrop before becoming targeted for their unsympathetic attention.

Nor did the shabby, depressed state of the neighborhood where he lived offer much comfort to the child. Laurel Street was still wearing its old tuxedo, but a simple laundering would not have been enough to restore its residents to the premium social register they had once enjoyed, and a boutonniere would only have served to mock its former glory. Stains had seeped through the frayed, faded fabric. Its elbows were patched, the spotted cummerbund stretched.

In the late 1800's, before the tenements, it had been a desirable, almost elegant, closely-knit and cozy place to live, populated principally by upper middle-class Jews. They were generally small business owners, professionals and tradesmen. Butchers, grocers and deli-men, shoemakers and tailors shared the same lunchroom counter with the doctors, pharmacists, opticians and dentists. Radio and gramophone repairmen, live poultry merchants and second-hand store owners spilled the same popcorn in the neighborhood theater with accountants and lawyers and salvage yard recyclers. For the most part, they walked from their homes to their jobs in the adjoining commercial district, attended the same temple and entrusted their children to Hill Street Elementary. Everyone added his essential ingredient to the hearty mix.

Their turn-of-the-century homes housed them in comfort and, if not the highest luxury, a gracious urban respectability and style. These were quality homes, single-family and duplex, built to endure, the pride and joy of their owners. They made a statement to the inhabitants: This is your family's reward for being a vital cog in the pump that drives the city's pulse. Thank you for your service and your faith.

The cogs were admittedly cogs, but they accepted their roles with pride. The worker was worthy of his wage. His dignified home proved that. Every resident's home proved that. He had faith that the machine's output and efficiency depended on his contributions.

It had been a very shady street. The city planners, inspired by Frederick Law Olmstead and the great city park planners who had done so much to bring nature to urban dwellers, had mandated the planting of Locust, Maple and Buttonball trees- one per home- on each side of the street. This effort resulted in a plush canopy just at or above the rooflines of the houses and their upper-story, open-air balconies. Neighbors would sit outside in them in the evenings listening to live big band concerts and their favorite radio shows, enjoying each other's tree-house company. Laurel buzzed with their voices. During the summers they'd cheer for the Dodgers and on Friday nights thrill to live boxing matches. The greening of the street was refreshing, the shade was calming, and the air seemed pure, a pleasure to draw in after the daily stint at work, where one labored for both a cause and a paycheck. Life had purpose and rewards.

But the Great Depression of the 30's ended the roar of prosperity. Companies disappeared and factories shut down. Unemployment raged. Workers were laid off and labor became less precious. Customers who had never counted their change lost jobs and struggled to pay for their most basic needs. Neighbors still greeted each other as they passed in the streets, but the hats men tipped were neither sharp nor crisp and the ladies wore last season's fashions.

There were consequences for the neighborhood. A cash-strapped man, unsure of his employment status will be boxed into the grim choice of either feeding his family or maintaining his home. And when many of the once solid pillars find themselves shoulder-stoopingly unemployed, their homes insupportable, when they realize that they are no longer essential workers and their services are unwanted, the neighborhood degenerates as they leave seeking new livelihoods.

As for the steadfast man who remains to walk the streets where once he labored, the joyful confidence that in prosperous times seemed eternal translates into self-doubt and disaffection. His pride recedes into bitter reminiscence as his desperation deepens. Shameful guilt and unworthiness he cannot suppress seep into his home, deprive him of the comfort and consolation of his family, of the wife and children whom he has failed to protect and provide for. And so, despair leaves him vulnerable to those who promise a quick fix, hucksters, rascals and rogues, the McCarthys he ignored when the promise of his prospects was secure, when he stood tall on solid legs.

Of course, not everyone loses his job, and not all downsized businesses necessarily shut down. Some who remain do try to keep their standards high and families intact. But with economic distress comes resulting poverty and its faithful handmaidens: drugs, crime, stressed schools with their gangs- an overall malaise of spirit. Empty houses fill with transients or are abandoned. The area inevitably loses its familial, neighborly warmth and forces a grin through a partial set of stained, chipped dentures. New residents find cheap rents and no cause for loyalty- and old-timers withdraw into suspicion. The neighborhood deteriorates. Eventually a row of homes is knocked down and replaced with rickety firetrap tenements that soon match the degeneracy of their surroundings. And immigrants, black, white and brown, begin to fill the empty spaces. It was such a void that Alex's family inhabited.

Despite his otherness, Alex did make a very special friend at Hill. Marvin Rosenthal was a one-boy cavalry. A year older than Alex, self-possessed, stocky and brave, Marvin lived at the other end of Laurel Street and sometimes the two returned home after school by the same route, Scanlon Street, the boys only separating when it terminated at Laurel.

Marvin was not one to tolerate the hounding he witnessed Alex enduring, and at the risk of being called a commie-lover or taking a punch, allied himself the way thoughtful children sometimes do, standing up when diplomacy failed. He would have preferred a sand-lot pick-up ball game. But the abuse he beheld was unacceptable to this serious boy who had overheard the adults of his family whisper, when they thought he was out of earshot, of wartime horrors that had cost the lives of most of his European relatives- inexplicable horrors that nobody discussed openly, especially among children, horrors particularly directed at a special, specific target: his own people, the Jews. So, Marvin stepped into Alex's Cold War and walked close to him despite the jeering, heckling and sometimes violent crowds.

Alex's first friend brought him into his home for a formal family introduction and gifted him his well-thumbed comic books, colorful as joy, for his amusement, edification and especially Americanization. And his mother made the boy- he looked so thin!- thick kosher sandwiches to eat right there at the Rosenthal table. With meat. There would be no visible bruises, no shredded

clothing, nothing but a short stack of paper and a lessening of appetite to explain when he would return to his own family.

Mrs. Rosenthal asked, “Would you like orange juice with that, Alex- or grape?” and remembering her kindness and his bond with Marvin, the revived, inspired child turned devoted attention to mastering his friend’s gift much the same way he’d begun studying Russian from a Cyrillic alphabet book at age 3, matching words to comic pictures. Armed with resources and methodology, encouragement and motivation, his English began to rally sweetly and playfully. Sure, televisions were still “televeesors,” but the boy was very “heppy,” feeling for the first time a burst of confidence that he’d never known. And above all, Alex considered himself ecstatically lucky to have made a generous, open-hearted friend whose family liked and accepted him.

The move to Oldhall when he was nine years of age inspired more hope, despite the new neighborhood’s familiar, faded look. Alex would miss the painted ladies of his first-floor tenement on Laurel. He’d see them through their beckoning open door when he’d come home, lounging on red velvet divans, smoking cigarettes and sharing gossip, splendid in their exotic silk kimonos, a flash of garter and hose through a careless slit, high heels on Cinderella feet. How comforting it would be to share a welcome home cookie and comic book with them after a harrowing school day. To lay an untouched head on a mothering breast. They always smiled with those garish, over-worked, compromised lips to greet their wayward child as he climbed the dark and creaky steps to his family’s second-floor apartment.

One day when he returned home, they sealed their affection for him with a gift of confidence and aspiration: a toy doctor’s bag equipped with candy pills, plastic hypodermic needle, stethoscope and faith. When his father, Gregori, discovered its source, he returned it with a stern warning to Alex regarding proper company that made no sense to the child. And ever after, their door stayed closed and locked, his dream of a shared cookie and polite conversation futile and revoked.

Alex would not miss the red-eyed old man associated with them. There could be no hiding from him: He was aware of every dust motte, every cigarette butt, every scrap of human dissipation that littered his putrid domain. Squat, bloated, generally unshaven, a stained wife-beater over his distended belly, he was unsmiling, critical and ever-present. Sporting suspenders high-watering ragged slacks above his drooping unwashed socks and the shoelace-bereft brogues he had slit open to ease a projecting bunion, the old man took his stand teetering on a shaky stool in that stifling first floor hallway, watching and waiting by the light of dim wall-lamps glowing in pockets of acrid clouds. Smokey stickiness of his favored cigars, guinea-stinker Parodi’s, two for fifteen cents, laminated his domain with crop-duster thoroughness. Their pitchy stench irritated Alex’s eyes and steeped gummy bitters into his nose. It fouled the fetid air and blended with the fog of stale spilt spirits and too much dime-store perfume; it clung to the walls, the floor, the tatty furniture and shabby people as it settled. Within this seedy glory sat that sentry with the blue-veined cheeks, who would wring the neck of a park pigeon and proclaim it dinner squab, count his thick bankroll and call the women his little birdies.

Nor would Alex miss the battered fan-leafed gingkoes that mucked his careless shoes with their slimy, reeking late summer fruit- nor the shattered litter of Thunderbird slivers he carefully tip-toed around, gagging on the spilt wine’s thick, stale, malingering fumes. And one time on that same street, returning from school on a day of sunshine promise, more repugnant memory best left forgotten- another stench and image the boy could neither unsee nor neutralize: a skillet-sized box turtle some passing car had crushed and left to huff its final gasp in the filthy gutter, alone and unlamented. How did it get to this unlikely place, the shocked boy wondered with grown-up distress,

so far from its natural home- and, if not by accident, why had it been hurt so callously, left discarded like so much roadside trash?

By 9 years of age, Alex's English was much improved. He had been pursuing his comic book language lessons with the plucky tenacity of a child pedant for almost three years. During that time, despite being outnumbered and outgunned, Batman and Robin had managed to save Gotham City from the devilish Penguin, Riddler, Joker and alluring Catwoman. Superman moved mountains of Kryptonite and lifted sinking ocean liners from raging seas. Uncle Scrooge had dived into his money bin, gold coins showering his head, and Huey, Dewey and Louie solved the mystery of the hen who laid square eggs. Alex too dreamed of better things and opportunity had come his way. Oldhall loomed. When both families finally left their Laurel Street homes, Marvin, whose old telephone number had become disconnected and new address lost, held the lamp beside its golden door.

The flight from Hill to Hall had advantages besides the obvious for a family of five, replacing the smothering claustrophobia of a one-bedroom, roach-ridden ghetto tenement with the glory of a run-down two-story fixer-upper bread box. Gregori and mother Lydia would have a proper bedroom of their own, and a real bed instead of a fold-out couch in the living room. Alex would also have a room, his younger sister Zoya and baby Zina together bunking in the one remaining. There would be no rats for Greg to stalk with the patience of a spider and shoot with his lethal slingshot as he had from their Hill kitchen window into the garbage-strewn alley below.

But it was Oldhall Street Elementary School that gave Alex his greatest hope: a second chance to meet new friends and blend in with his peers the way any other boy would.

The principal delivered him to the door of this new world. Mr. Connor was tall (though all adults appeared mammoth to Alex), portly and detached, a politician in search of a dream sinecure that he already possessed. He was neither enthused nor annoyed with Alex, but he packed no visible ruler and there was a mildness- or perhaps acceptance- in his passive expression. His averted eyes seemed focused on things no one else saw. Still, Alex had learned from Hill experience that it would be in his best interest to avoid him just as he avoided Mrs. Murphy after that afternoon dismissal when he had dodged her just short of the screech of a brake pad's limitation.

Having been warned that morning that unfriendly people would be waiting for him after school, there could be no learning; instead, he misspent the day's class time on obsessive worry. There was no resisting it. Anxiety absorbed this day as it had most others. It seemed to stretch like an epoch rather than a season. It smothered his better thoughts, lay deep in his belly like hunger during famine. Who was it going to be this time- and how many would there be? How was he going to get away from them? What explanation could he offer Lydia to excuse another torn shirt, another scraped knee or elbow? He knew how Gregori would react. Another beating for his repeat-offender delinquency.

By the time classes finally ended, he had decided against using Scranton Street in favor of an alternate, diversionary route home. But his exit strategy failed: scouts had been posted; a mob that clothed its violence in knock-off robes of patriotic duty was waiting, bored urchins looking for a thrill after another long day of dull, useless lessons. He was spotted and the chase was on. They had prepared a lesson of their own to teach this commie spy.

He was running just ahead of the pack when he franticly dashed between two parked cars and out onto the street, imagining that there would be more safety in oncoming traffic than on the sidewalk. Had he paused to look both ways, he would have seen Mrs. Murphy's DeSoto careening toward the melee like a patrol car chasing down a burglar. But by the time he realized the foolishness

of his desperate judgment, her massive chrome bumper had missed him by the length of a well-used pencil. The patriots, recognizing the car and their principal, lowered their heads and hurriedly dispersed, but there would be no escape for Alex. The brakes did their work, tires pointed black rubber tracks at him, and she, non-buckled on the bench seat, lurching forward to the windshield, inflamed, glaring eyes locking onto the offending jayrunner, had her meat measured and identified.

Ignominiously yanked out of class, shamed before his teachers and peers, Mrs. Murphy, Good Book in one hand, ruler in the white-knuckled other, dispensed inevitable and absolute justice to him in her office the next day.

This ragamuffin had almost caused an automobile accident which she, through prudence and foresight had fortunately forestalled, no thanks to his reckless disregard of accepted safety protocol. (Alex curled his forehead: pro-to-call sounded foreboding. He hoped it didn't involve his parents.) He had brought shame and humiliation to both his school and his family. He had already burdened Hill with his truculence (here 7-year-old Alex squinted: 'truck-you…lence" must be a lot more trouble than simply being hit by a car), he had been brought to her attention for engaging in several altercations (he turned his focus to "all-ter-ca-tions" particularly troubled by the magnitude "all" suggested) and now this, the spiked pit of the slippery slide.

Why couldn't he simply get along with the others? Didn't he believe in coexistence? What's wrong with these people anyway? Why don't they learn to speak English like the rest of us?

They, these ingrates, come here to America, trash every benefit we give them, disrespect our generosity, suffer no consequences. They want our sympathy- they want us to feel sorry for them, like they're some persecuted lilies of the field. What good are they? What do they offer? They take, take, take, demand more, more, more, are never satisfied and reward us with their thanklessness. Well, not this time, Buster. Not this time.

Mr. Connor tapped on the classroom door, made his excuses and explanations to Mrs. Philpot, deposited the child and vanished into the astral plane where he abided.

Class was in session; homeroom had begun; attendance had been taken. And here was yet another interruption! Somehow these irresponsible young sprouts can't even get to school on time! Well, we can only do our best for them, despite their efforts at self-annihilation. What the class heard Mrs. Philpot say was:

"Class, I want to introduce you to a new student, Alexander Orlov…, Orlov…, Orlov-skidge, who is joining us today. Please welcome him and make him feel at home."

The surname was supposed to be pronounced "Or-lov-sky" but somehow phonetics had not been a requisite for the curriculum vitae of the Ellis Island officials who had originally registered Gregori Gavrilovich Orlovsky as Gregory Gary Orlovskij. Nor did it help that Gregori didn't know how to spell his name in English, but it's doubtful that even if he'd been a linguist instead of a stateless refugee, he would have presumed to register a correction, so overwhelmed were all of the Orlovskijs to finally have reached their new American home after those many years of roofless, soul-searing flight. Bedazzled by their American dream, ignorant of their new language, they had neither cause nor means to quibble over such details, and they accepted the process with gratitude and relief. The Orlovskys had become Orlovskijs.

Back at Hill, 4-year-old Alex had not responded to this unfamiliar Americanization, this outlandish sounding "Orlovskidge," when his teachers first called on him, and they had thought him deaf or stupid, most likely, both. One complained, not out of hearing range of Alex and his peers, "He

doesn't know his own name!" and Alex's breath shortened and his reddened ears tingled as he gradually deciphered the meaning and humiliation of those words. It would eventually become apparent to the boy that any expectation of "Orlovsky" properly sounded by those reading "Orlovskij" would be futile. He had been permanently and unwillingly renamed at Hill, seconded unanimously at Hall, and he could do nothing about it.

So, when Mrs. Philpot ("And where did she get her name? How does any family get its name?" he wondered) called him "Alexander Orlov-skidge" and directed him to his well-worn but thoroughly scrubbed desk, he accepted the unavoidable pronunciation with exasperated grace but was heartily relieved by his escape to this assigned blind from which he could study his new surroundings in relative obscurity.

Outside, the April sun was beaming its faithful dazzle on the immense, ancient maple trees that palisaded the building like a shield wall guarding its most cherished treasure. Their freshly sprouted mottled green cheered him through the many-paned windows that stretched from radiators to ceiling and seemed to form the bulk of the exterior wall. Lashes of brightness broke through the foliage and tickled by the breeze, careened through the glass, drifted across the off-white wall papered with student work, posters, the alphabet and number line, class photographs, a music scale, announcements- the serious business, the stuff of learning. And along the remaining two walls with their mandatory chalkboards, a yellow-stained upright piano and a bookshelf library. He could sing with his soon-to-be mates and perhaps borrow a take-home book for later. Tochno! Not bad at all.

But what came to mind was the memory of a familiar smell he noticed one day in First Grade back at Hill when he was sitting at his floor-bolted, bubble-gum encrusted desk- an unmistakable, musky pervasiveness that had no relevance in a classroom setting, that could not, should not, have been there at all. Yet there was no denying it- and his perceptive, though somewhat lazy, off-centered blue-grey eyes, guided by his nose, soon uncovered the source. Directly to his left and below the hem of a billowy white cotton skirt, lay a glossy, perfectly formed turd, tipped neatly at its end.

Shocked and appalled, he looked up and saw the defeated and humiliated expression of the tan-skinned girl undoubtedly responsible for it, the raking stare that locked her imploring eyes to his stunned ones and shared a secret guilt, the feeble, pathetic grimace, her recognition that he had uncovered her most intimate, most profane indignity.

Perhaps she was as nasty as he had heard Gregori proselytize when he berated non-white foreigners, domestic Cadillac-driving exploiters of Welfare, the lazy, the shiftless, the willfully ignorant. Perhaps she was part of all that. But what if she knew even less English than he? She had not spoken a word. Perhaps, he imagined, she had been too painfully shy to raise her hand to publicly request a lavatory pass. Perhaps she felt that she had no right to one, that a request on her part was unthinkable. That he understood. But no previous experience could advise him whether she was victim or villain, though he'd heard many a cautionary tale at home. Still, he could not deny the depth of her brown, imploring eyes that had drawn an unmistakable appeal to his humanity, as though they were seeking a Marvin of their own.

And she was dressed formally, starchily, as if she were in church. Her black patent leather pumps were unscratched and her bright-white ankle socks were evenly cuffed. Her dark brown hair had been patiently, meticulously braided with pleated silk ribbons. Somebody had pressed her education with a hot iron.

There were no errant turds on the floor of this or any other Oldhall classroom. And no bolts were needed to floor-bind the desks to "maintain discipline." Mrs. Philpot was perfectly capable of terrorizing her charges without recourse to hardware.

Simultaneously an object of guarded respect and ridicule, restrained affection and fear, Mrs. Philpot was to Alex and most of his peers their first "negro" teacher, an alien and strange authority, and they, the white, the black and brown, would respond to her tests with their own and a not-too-subtle constant provocation. But just then, just after the start of that first day, what he recognized from her lips was a recitation of the Lord's Prayer in English which he and his Orthodox grandmother, Babushka, repeated in Russian on their genuflecting knees every school-year weekend and summer-vacation morning when he stayed with her and Dyedushka, his grandfather:

"Our Father…"

"Bozsheh Nahc…"

Brown chocolate. White chocolate. It was chocolate after all, reassuring and familiar despite the strange, dark source, and he felt more confident and secure in his new place with these new Hall people. They were not, apparently, heathens.

The morning prayer having been transmitted to Heaven above, the educational component of the school day could now proceed. Just as she did every day, Mrs. Philpot had prepared a special appetizer to launch her lessons. She was stoutly convinced that her students' curiosity required whetting before the learning meal could be served. To stimulate their receptiveness, she'd serve up an irresistible nibble, usually a curious riddle for them to solve. Sometimes she'd write groups of scrambled letters on the chalkboard, like:

ton'd yrc ervo llipsde kilm

that the children would arrange into words to form short, complete sentences clever and telling as a Chinese fortune.

She particularly enjoyed writing sentences without punctuation and capitalization to see how many different meanings the children could come up with when they made the corrections. Here's a classic example of her virtuosic cunning:

i'm hungry let's eat grandma

And every Tuesday, the official "add 1 day," was a non-stop source of merriment. On those Threesdays, kids would scratch their fiveheads in twoderment, Nurse Fortuna became Nurse Fivethreena, two went three the bathroom, and little girls wore pethreenias in their hair. During lunchtime, sthreedents nine threena with their fiveks, and so on and so fifth. Their joyous wit, a gift in itself, was always freely rewarded with what she called "extra credit bonus points," the intentional redundancy spiking the value of the prize.

To add an aura of mystery and suspense, Mrs. Philpot never took credit for any of the treats she presented, defraying all acclaim to a separate entity, her personal muse whom she called "The Puzzler," an enigmatic figure, doubtless a spirit, who guided her during private moments of inspiration. Although the children could not agree if he was as real as Santa Claus, most had to concede that his slick brain twisters made thinking that might otherwise have been stressful and cumbersome a lot of fun. And his gift of extra credit was very helpful and much appreciated when

report card day arrived. So, when The Lord's Prayer was over, all eyes and ears would focus expectantly on the delicacy The Puzzler had prepared and Mrs. Philpot would deliver for their amusement and collateral instruction.

"Children, The Puzzler has a special story to tell you today," Mrs. Philpot began in a light drawl more familiar in deep southern states. "He is going to present it to you by way of a song you might have already heard. We will hear it sung by Mr. Nat King Cole who is a very talented singer and pianist. Raise your hand if you know who he is!"

Several hands flew up. Fifty million viewers relaxing after supper on their living room couches had listened to Mr. Cole perform on the Ed Sullivan Show that previous Sunday.

Not satisfied with anything less than unanimous participation, she considered a different approach. "Did any of you see him on television this past weekend?"

Every hand in the room but one flew up. "Me, Me, Me's" echoed off the walls, oozed out the windows, filtered into the two adjoining classrooms, drifted throughout the hallway. Family night television was a national pastime. Mrs. Philpot knew she had provoked their interest. Now to restore focus and the order deep concentration required.

"Well, don't you know The Puzzler did too! Mr. Cole's performance reminded him of another song he recorded about a buzzard who took a monkey for a ride way up high in the cool, fresh sky one very hot and humid day. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes, Yes, Yes's" joined the "Me, Me, Me's" that were still bobbing along the walls.

"Now I am certain that you all are familiar with what a monkey is. But have any of you ever heard of a buzzard?"

That question was easy to answer. Except for Alex, all the students watched Looney Tunes and could recall Bugs Bunny's recurring humiliation of Beaky Buzzard who would try so ridiculously and fail so miserably to make a main course of him.

"It's a bird! A big silly-looking bird!" an aspiring ornithologist volunteered.

"With a white collar around his neck!" another close observer added.

"Like the one the priest wears!" a Sunday School scholar offered.

Though Mrs. Philpot could have provided material for Art Linkletter, her eyes widened at this last response.

"Something like that. A big, silly-looking bird!" she tentatively agreed. "Do you know another name for a buzzard?" Mrs. Philpot never let an opportunity to teach a little extra pass unproductively.

This question stumped them. Silence prevailed. Mrs. Philpot waited a few moments before giving them a hint.

"The word rhymes with 'culture', by which we mean good manners."

Still no response. Mrs. Philpot was not one to give up. But they needed another hint.

"How about the cowboy shows you watch? What birds do you see circling in the sky when someone is lost in the desert?"

The head scratching paid off. Two students, faces lit by sudden insight, shot their arms up.

"Vulture! Vulture!" they blurted with joy: "A buzzard's a vulture!"

"So it is! That's worth a point!" and she made a red dot next to each student's name in her roll book.

"I'll soon need a new book to hold all the credit you all been getting! Now one more question before we listen to Mr. Cole's song: What does a vulture or buzzard eat when he's hungry?"

"Rabbits! Rabbits!" the class roared in unison.

"That's true- but a buzzard is not too picky. Sometimes they get so hungry that they'll eat most anything. Think about that while we're listening to the song."

Having offered that good advice, she pulled an Audiotronics portable record player out from under her desk- that and a slide projector constituted the offerings of the Oldhall Audio/Visual Department- and placed it on a table near an electrical outlet, removed its cover and plugged it in. Then she carefully removed a record from its dust jacket and lowered it onto the spindle, turned the power on and adjusted the volume so all could hear the story.

"Now you all listen carefully to the words. We'll talk about what the song means when it finishes. Remember: Listen carefully!"

Mrs. Philpot raised the phonograph's arm, placed the needle on the whirling record with barely a pop, and this is the song Alex struggled to make sense of:

A buzzard took a monkey for a ride in the air.

The monkey thought that everything was on the square.

The buzzard tried to throw the monkey off his back.

The monkey grabbed his neck and said "Now listen, Jack…"

Straighten up and fly right.

Straighten up and fly right.

Straighten up and fly right.

Cool down, Papa, don't you blow your top!

(Here the children let out a massive howl, delighted by the comic image of their fathers' exploding heads. Alex sensed that he had missed some very amusing point.)

Ain't no use in divin'.

What's the use of jivin'?

Straighten up and fly right.

Cool down, Papa, don't you blow your top.

(More students howled, but Alex remained befuddled. What had Poppa done that was so unlike him?)

The buzzard told the monkey, “You are choking me!

Release your hold; I will set you free!”

The monkey looked the buzzard right dead in the eye and said:

“Your story’s so touching, but it sounds just like a lie!”

Straighten up and fly right!

Straighten up and stay right!

Cool down, Papa, don’t you blow your top!

These three lines repeated one last time, the tune ended with an emphatic “Fly right!”, and the audience thundered its approval with hand clapping and cheers.

“I’m so happy you liked the song!” the pleased teacher exclaimed above the din. “But it raises some questions. Simmer on down now so’s we can figure this out.” She waited patiently for the class to settle, and just as soon as she was satisfied by their attention said, “Who would like to start asking questions about the song?” Mrs. Philpot believed that questions must always precede statements during discovery. It made sense to get the facts straight before arriving at conclusions.

“Why’d the monkey wanna go for a ride in the air in the first place?” a pensive child wondered. “You wouldn’ta catch me up there for nothin’!”

“For fun! For fun!” most responded cheerily.

“Maybe tuh cool off…” a keen observer offered. “It wuzza hot day- remember?”

“If that buzzard wuz anything like Beaky,” a cynic offered, “he wuz probly upta somethin’ real sneaky!”

“Sure he was! But why’d the buzzard try tuh throw the monkey off his back after he invited ‘im for a ride?” a bushy-browed future detective pondered, seeking to uncover the bird’s underlying motive.

“Yeah- that’s right! And why’d the monkey choke the buzzard?” asked his future partner in the war against crime.

“He was jus’ holdin’ on. He didn’ wanna fall all the way tuh thu groun’,” replied a willing witness.

“Sure! That’s why he wudden leggo! It musta bin a long way to drop!” added another concerned bystander.

“O.K, but he said ‘chokin’, not jus’ holdin’ on. Choked buzzards don’t fly so good- an’ then they make the big plop…” the detective continued examining the details of the case.

“Yeah,” agreed his partner, “an’ a real mess! That monkey was smarter dan tuh kill his own ride an’ end up splatteroo.”

“He musta had a good reason to take a chance like that,” a curly-haired sweety added, “Monkeys is smart!”

“Smarter than some people I kin mention,” noted a future psychiatrist.

“Well, all that’s fine an’ good- but why’d the buzzard tell the monkey he’d set ‘im free if the monkey was the one chokin’ ‘im?!! It just don’t make sense…” the detective wrinkled his brow, scratched his ear and continued probing, “… no sense at all…” He paused and then his eyes sparkled with a sudden insight, “…unless…”

“And what was he lyin’ about this time?” a pretty, future English teacher with a perplexed look interrupted his speculations.

“I betcha that buzzard started the whole thing, jus like on t.v.” ventured the detective’s brusque and somewhat crabby partner, ignoring her and pursuing his deductive probing. “He musta been uptuh somethin’ ‘spicious!”

There was a lot of sense in that, the children agreed.

“You kin trust a monkey just like Tarzan, but we all know Beaky!” offered a critic of Saturday matinees.

“An’ iffen the buzzard promised to set ‘im free, that means he musta took ‘im prisner,” reckoned a checkers afficionado.

“Yeah- that’s it; that’s gotta be it! The buzzard musta thought he had the monkey all set for the big fall, but it was the monkey takin’ ‘im for the ride all along!” concluded the detective, “The monkey was too smart for ‘im, an’ beat him at his own game. Watta dummy!” He squinted, scratched his nose, raised his hand as if to adjust a fedora that he wasn’t wearing and smugly grumbled, “An’ that, Kids, that’s the way the cookie crumbles. Except in this case, it wasn’t cookies that was gonna crumble…”

“That monkey played ‘im just like Bugs does!” another devotee of Saturday morning cartoons pointed out, bolstering the detective’s theory.

“But the monkey did accep’ the ride. An’ he should notta trusted strange buzzards. Everybody knows yuh can’t trust ‘em. An’ if he thought everything was square an’ on the uppenup, he couldn’ta been so smart, could he? Nossir. He probly shoulda knew the trouble he was gettin’ into before he got on ‘is back. If you ask me, that monkey was reckless an’ takin’ a big chance. He hadda know the risk he was takin’- an’ how yuh gonna blame hungry buzzards doin’ what comes naturly to ‘em?” a future lawyer laid out the bird’s defense, “An’ that monkey ain’t as innocent as he looks.”

A future secretary in pigtails and ribbons who had kept silent up to that time, finally could contain herself no longer. “I dunno why ya gotta make it so complicated,” she exploded, her freckles taking on a darker hue. “Don’t you dopes realize the buzzard wanna’d to eat the monkey? He’da dropped him first. An’ that’s why the monkey was holdin’ on, chokin’ ‘im! It was murder all along!”

“Sure, it was murder! But who was gonna get who first is what I wanna know!” added the secretary’s best friend smiling sweetly.

“Turns out the bad guy ain’t so bad- an’ the good guy ain’t so good,” concluded the detective with a wink and a pre-sardonic grin.

Little hands clapped in approval. The classroom burst out in uproar. The children's laughter ricochetted, amplified by the hard plaster walls. Even Alex joined in the resonant hullabaloo. He had been following the situation fastidiously and was satisfied with the conclusion his classmates had uncovered. Someday, he thought, he wouldn't have to work so hard to figure things out.

The clamoring had achieved its purpose. The case was solved and filed away. Mrs. Philpot rose to restore order and come to a resolution.

"Now that's just what The Puzzler thought too! The buzzard must have been awful hungry because from what I heard, he'd already eaten a turtle and a snake by the time he got to the monkey! The monkey made a big mistake agreeing to get on the buzzard's back, but he was smart enough to figure out what the buzzard was up to before he was eaten!" She paused to let it all sink into the students' heads. Her next question was key; she didn't want all that instructive hubbub to go to waste. "So, what do you think the moral of this story is?" she finally asked.

"Think twice before messin' with buzzards!" the future lawyer advised.

"Don'tcha believe everythin' yuh hear!" added a nascent car salesman.

"Bes' be like Bugs!" proclaimed the wise aleck who sneak-read his older sister's Mad magazines when his mother wasn't looking.

"An' doncha be silly saps fallin' for some hungry bird who's always hangin' aroun', lookin' for trouble," the detective warned, circling his foreboding index finger around the class. "'Cause yuh might be next…"

His advice went unheeded. In the surety and safety of the classroom, nobody felt like a potential victim. And despite their criticisms of her, nobody doubted that Mrs. Philpot would protect every student from buzzards and monkeys and any other danger that might find its way into the classroom.

"Straighten up and fly right!" bellowed most of the other children. Alex had to agree with them. The other choices seemed too obvious for his taste.

"An' plus don't yuh go flippin' yo' wig!" the wise aleck felt obligated to add, much to everyone's unconstrained delight.

Having set the proper learning tone for the day, Mrs. Philpot felt the confidence to move on to the next subject, the one that evoked the most fear, anger and avoidance for the majority of her students. So once the tickled children had settled down, Arithmetic took its grim turn. It soon became apparent that Alex was below grade level in Mathematics as well, barely proficient at his adds and subtracts, glaringly barren at his times tables. It would take Mrs. Philpot some extra effort to get him to understand that multiplication was a form of something he already knew. A few months later, propelled by Gregori's apple and coached by Mrs. Philpot, he would crack the enigma of those times tables.

Two lessons had earned everyone a break. It was milk time, if one had the subsidized price of two cents, which of course he didn't. At Mrs. Philpot's direction, the children, all of them it seemed, took turns, one-by-one, pressing forward to the table with the crate, choosing strawberry, chocolate or whole. When his turn came, Alex, tongue-tied, stammered incomprehensibly that he was fine (they could all see that for themselves by the way he sputtered), that he did not require milk presently, and that he was grateful for the offer but could not accept, thank you very much. Nobody understood the words, but the Slavic spectacle was entertaining.

Once after a snowfall back at Hill, Alex had arrived at the school in a soggy zip-up union suit meant for snow wear. It was sunny when he left the apartment and Lydia, not foreseeing the need, did not dress him in pants and shirt under it. There was irresistible snow on the ground that morning and Alex made full use of it during his walk to school, arriving more drip than dry. To his dubious rescue came two conscientious matrons bent on forcing his union suit off, he desperately screaming one of the seven or eight words he knew in English: “No! No! No!”- the nightmare performance that ended with their mortifying laughter and his being sent home by Mrs. Murphy to face further consequences of his delinquency.

“Wait ‘til Poppa gets home!” was what an enraged Lydia said.

“Why does she always have to tell him unpleasant things she can manage on her own, the way Babushka does?” thought the boy.

In his present moment of lactic distress, three and a half years of comic book scholarship bluntly failed him, but Mrs. Philpot got the idea and came to his aid. She merely went to his desk, handed him a milk- strawberry, her choice of flavor- told him that she happened to have an extra, wouldn’t you know, and informed the class that patience is a virtue. And that, she reckoned, was that.

And that would have been that if it hadn’t been for this: Alex had never opened a milk carton before and struggling with its Gordian complexity and too shy to observe how his peers had opened theirs, squeezing just a mite too enthusiastically, succeeded in making a pink wading pool of his desktop, and to the youthful observers, a laughable spectacle of his preposterous self. His clumsy efforts were rewarded with hoots and mockery:

“He don’t know how tuh open a milk carton!” reflected a youthful philosopher.

“The milk’s drippin’ on the floor!” noted the thick-lensed budding scientist.

“What kinda accent is that?” a shrewd observer of humanity wondered.

“Where’s he from?” demanded another, a junior enforcer of all things righteous and holy.

“Will yuh look at that mess!” declared yet one more seeker of truth and beauty.

Again, Mrs. Philpot took charge, official classroom rag at the ready. “Maybe he’s one of those retarded children,” she thought to herself. “He’ll probably be a whole handful.”

What she said was:

“No harm done. Accidents happen. Patience is a virtue. Reach out in kindness, children.”

Then she, not the custodian, wiped his desk and the floor, wrote the lavatory pass and sent him down the hall to wash up. While he was gone, she addressed the excited Fourth Graders:

“Now you all simmer on down and listen up! I don’t want to hear any more guff from you. This here boy is a stranger in a new place. He has much to learn, but we must give him a Christian embrace and a fair chance. Now don’t you go making me ashamed of you. Make me proud that I am your teacher. Help him. Be his friend. Do the right thing and be assured that you will be rewarded. Always remember there’s God up above watching us down here below.”

Mrs. Philpot didn’t hold the separation of church and state in any kind of regard. She simply ignored it.

When Alex sheepishly returned, he found the class much settled and vaguely polite. And as he approached his desk, he saw a container of milk, opened especially for him. Chocolate. His favorite.

And except for him, every child knew that at the end of the day when the returns were counted, Mrs. Philpot would be paying for the extra milk. That's what "ton'd yrc ervo llipsde kilm" meant.

Alex was somewhat reprieved next period, during English ironically enough, though the boy was hardly fluent from having spoken Russian exclusively for the first four and a half years of his life in a radio and television-delete house devoid of all non-Cyrillic writing. When his time to recite came, he found the Reader familiar, Dick, Jane and Spot old comrades he had known back at Hill. As a matter of fact, some of Marvin's silly, juvenile comic books were written at a significantly higher level than the Reader and he had pursued his studies consistently with needy curiosity, this effort resulting in a tentative confidence. It was only a matter of time, he reasoned, before he'd get all those weirdly entrancing words and expressions fluent and revealed. And he could spell with that wobbly, pre-calligraphic hand. Those weekly quizzes Mrs. Philpot gave would soon convince her that the boy was, certainly, not "retarded."

In those days, Oldhall was strictly a neighborhood school. There were no well-intentioned buses from remote well-heeled districts and no parent dropped a child off in a car, though some elders accompanied the little ones by foot, and the students were dismissed to walk home for a 45-minute lunch, school resuming at 1:00 o'clock. This is what Alex did the first day, a toddle he'd repeat for two and a half more years. After class ended, as the students left the building, girls and boys having assembled at their respective exits, Alex noticed that the crowd essentially sallied forth in either of two directions: South, toward his old Hill stomping ground, or North, toward its embryonic equivalent.

Alex headed North, looking for Zoya. She'd be hungry too: This was her first busy day of Third Grade at Oldhall. Maybe Lydia had a good lunch waiting for them- too much to expect tuna sandwiches, more likely peanut butter and jelly. And there was always Kool-Ade, bless it. Perhaps the complexity of the milk carton had eluded him, but he certainly knew how to tear open an envelope and add a cup or two of sugar. As for today, no luncheon menu had been posted at the Orlovskij sideboard- the family did not even own one- but there would be something to ease the hunger he always seemed to carry. Just right now though, he had another vision displacing images of cupcakes and tuna fish sandwiches: Locate, escort and deliver Zoya.

The Orlovskij's new home and Oldhall Elementary School were located on the same street, Oldhall Street itself, a straight run of a quarter mile flanked on one side by the junior high school campus adjacent to Oldhall, and on the other by a block-long baseball field and its rickety, crumbling, uninsurable viewing stands. Only a neighboring house stood between theirs and the school. Alex knew from experience that there would be no place to hide during his homebound trek if circumstances required a subtle exit. The itinerary at Hill had been far more varied.

There had been times at Hill, when forewarned by taunts and threats- "Get the Commie!", "Russian spy!", "Kill them all!", "Send them back where they came from!", all those unnerving, hateful iterations, or enlightened by a casual, understated "They gonna getcha after school, boy!" whispered in his ear from a passing, all-knowing stranger- he knew that an unsympathetic pack would be awaiting him on his journey home. So, he had learned two alternate routes, both parallel

to Scanlon Street, the shortest and most direct passage. These took more time, but if he could leave Hill unnoticed and luck held, his chances of getting home safely were almost certain.

When he was observed leaving school by unfriendly folk, he had few choices besides staying and fighting: He could try to outrun the crowd or he could duck into someone's yard or, in desperation, break into an entryway if there was an unlocked door to hide past, prepared to explain the situation as best he could if he was discovered by a startled resident. He had recognized which houses had porched entrances or foyers and made mental notes. He had observed which garages had a lock he could get past, and he had scouted the alleyways they abutted.

The walk to and from Oldhall offered no such camouflage and protection. There were no parallel routes. He would be exposed and vulnerable on that bare street, apparent to anyone who cared to look, just like that diminutive figure that now came into view.

And there she was, alone, looking about guardedly for his familiar, comforting face, like a nestling on her first flight, wondering what to do, not unnerved by the unknown she had recently leaped into, serene as always, but cautious and somewhat uncharacteristically shy. Zoya was not one to panic easily and her first day had not demanded an exception to her prevailing composure. As always, her eyes, blue/grey like her brother's, flashed confidence and authority. She was short but stood tall, thin but solid, planted with the firmness of an anchor. Her straight chestnut hair was parted in pigtails, neat and precise, as was everything she turned her attention to: the conscientious folding of a shirt when she laundered, the careful way she held her fork and spoon when she dined, the penmanship at which she excelled, her ballerina posture and carriage- and a few years later, her perfect, machine-like stitchery gracing the apparel she would design and sew with the hands she had inherited from Gregori. She saw him and addressed him in the Russlish the two shared:

"Tih okay?"

"Da- tih?"

"Ya okay."

"Horosho! Shto za lunch?"

"Ne znayou. Mozhet bhit tuna!"

And she, by dint of superior insider information- kitchen duty- was right! Lydia had outdone herself. She greeted the two with a plate stacked with tuna fish sandwiches, diagonally sliced, wonderfully filling and delicious, the canned fish mixed with chopped celery, fresh dill, mayonnaise and diced hard-boiled eggs, thickly smeared between slices of Wonder Bread- more food than even three growing children could devour. But her smile became tentative when she spotted Alex's wet shirt, a consequence of his milk spill. She demanded an explanation and Alex did what he was learning to do with increasing proficiency: He lied a lie too sophisticated for a 9-year-old, the lie of omission.

"Sorry Ma. I got wet washing my hands at shkola. It's almost dry."

Then he added, remembering one of Mrs. Philpot's first lessons: "No harm done." He said all this in Russian. He wasn't taking any chances.

There was no sense bringing up the morning milk disaster- this revelation would only confirm her low opinion of him and perhaps lead to other consequences, unpleasant ones involving Gregori. At age 9 he knew enough to stay mum when it came to any event that would set his father's hair-

trigger anger off. He knew his best option was to keep him out of the present conversation and to take the “no-harm-done/nothing-to-see-here” position, hoping that Lydia would not think the incident important enough to invoke Gregori this time. And he succeeded in the distraction. When she said, “Don’t expect this every day,” she was referring to the food, not to any appeal to her kindly nature.

But his relief was short-lived because now, recalling the milk incident, he realized that he- and not just he, but his sister as well- would in the future need ten cents each for milk every week of the school year or face the social consequences of their poverty: ostracism and embarrassment. Gregori was not going to like financing this extravagance. Alex was already nicknamed “Parazeet” by his mother and dreaded asking for anything extra. He had been well conditioned not to. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to ask Lydia for the money. She’d say:

“Wait until your father gets home!”

And if she remembered, she’d add the wet shirt to the malevolent pile Gregori would have to deal with after his own miserable, soul-wracking day at the factory. No, the best course of action was the original sin of omission and then to count on the lack of memory she had already vividly displayed on past key occasions. So, he said nothing about the milk, hoping that she would not press him any further. And she did not.

It was time to return to school. One o’clock was rapidly approaching. Zoya and Alex thanked their mother, kissed her and little sister Zina goodbye and left for afternoon classes. It took 5 easy minutes to arrive without incident and then they were safely ensconced in their respective and rightful places, separated only until the 3 o’clock dismissal (officially, “dismission”) bell would ring.

Mrs. Philpot did not have to proclaim that there would be Music Class with vivacious Miss Messina this afternoon, but she was never lax in her etiquette and felt obligated to make the formal announcement. The students had been looking forward to the treat all week. Mrs. Philpot, despite her many shining abilities, was not a musician, and that blonde-stained upright demanded regular, professional pounding, the excitation and instruction provided by pretty Miss Messina once a week as part of her system-wide music “route.” And this day, Thursday, was Oldhall’s turn for fun.

Miss Messina was a recent graduate of the local state teachers’ college which boasted an orchestra of almost twenty players. Tall and poorly postured, the attractive redhead with luxuriant wavy hair, broad, beaming smile, perfect flashy teeth, and blue-tipped fingers was already there, awaiting her students’ arrival with her portfolio of mimeographed lyrics and musical notation. They greeted her with enthusiasm that seemed to relegate Mrs. Philpot to shadow status. The students, overwhelmed by the glamorous and zesty Miss Messina (“Barcarole, you carry my soul…” Alex would always remember), now paid her no mind. Mrs. Philpot quietly and politely edged herself into a corner and let the musician take command.

“Are you ready to sing?” she demanded, as if there were any wonder about that. All semblance of rigid conformity to obligatory rules and regulations, the “Please raise your hand before speaking,” the “Pay attention,” the “Keep your seats,” especially the “Quiet!!”- all those statutory appeals lost their relevancy during Music. With Miss Messina.

“Music is like a sport in which we compete,” she began to lecture the ecstatic fourth-graders, “but ‘com-pete’ in the sense of the original Latin, the language of ancient Rome, back in the days when the Romans thought of sport as a search both sides did together. Imagine that! Children, we ‘com-pete’ ‘together’ from the ‘com-‘, and we ‘search’ from ‘pedir,’ the word that ‘-pete’ comes from.

(Miss Messina's Latin was self-taught. So was her Spanish.) "In Music," she continued, "nobody loses! We still search together just like the Romans once did- but with songs, everybody doing their best to make them beautiful and meaningful. This is how we compete in Music: We search together!"

This invocation received uproarious approval, albeit no one knew what they would be searching for since she obviously had her portfolio with her just like she always did, and the instruments and players were all accounted for. And despite the fervent clamor, nobody knew what Ancient Rome with its Latin was.

"And who would like to help me distribute the…what do we call them children?" she asked no one in particular, informally testing them for the knowledge she had bequeathed in previous lessons.

"The lyrics! The lyrics! The lyrics!!" and the "Me," "Me," "Me's!!" that followed seemed to shake the floor and rattle the walls like the hobgoblins' midnight ball. The glistening leaves in the glass wall flashed like Roman candles. All remnants of Philpotian normalcy and dignity vanished. Music and boundless childish eagerness overwhelmed the space. In her corner, the displaced Mrs. Philpot just quietly watched and inwardly approved. She liked Miss Messina, though some of the songs she chose at times did not seem to delight her despite the enthusiasm of the children.

"Okay then, you, Betsy, and can you help too, Brian?"

Of course, Brian could help! And any teacher or fellow classmate could always depend on Betsy, the class poet, the future missionary, the Parson's daughter, with any task any time; her motto: Done! And Brian's mother taught Third Grade at Oldhall- she would be Zoya's teacher now. She had made a genuine blue-blooded, currently blue-nosed, gentleman of him: It would certainly be a pleasure to assist his teacher. A dee-light! The two made quick work of it and didn't mind the tinting of their fingertips at all. Nor did the class object to the familiar, alcohol-like chemical odor of mimeograph fluid that filled their lungs and crept into their brains as they unfailingly lifted the damp sheets to their expectant nostrils and smeared the tips of their noses. Things were livening up nicely.

"And what song shall we perform first?" the popular musician asked of the crooning neophytes.

"Blue Tail Fly!" "Blue tail fly-eyyy!" some aesthetes demanded.

"Swanee River! Swan-eeee!" the others implored.

The crowd had its favorites. Miss Messina was the only teacher who ever seemed to care about what they liked or wanted to do. She said:

"Then those are the songs we shall sing! But first"- the children held their collective breaths expecting a grand treat- "we are going to try a new tune, 'Grandfather's Clock,' which I think you will also like."

She directed their young attention to the first music sheet Betsy and Brian had passed out, the one headed "Grandfather's Clock," and continued speaking as she squeezed her way to the piano:

"I'll play and sing the first time and you follow the words on the sheet, the…"

"Leee-rics!" one enthusiast proclaimed.

"…Yes! Lyrics! And just try your best to feel the song inside your heart. How does it make you feel? What experiences have you had that it reminds you of? Just the way we learned 'The Fly' and 'Swanee.' And next week we'll discuss the nota…the nota…"

"Notation!" another devotee gleefully exclaimed.

"…Yes! Notation! We'll follow the notes- notes from notation- right?- (Miss Messina had it coming and going)- the way we do 'The Fly' and 'Swanee.' Once we familiarize ourselves with the lyrics (a few exuberants excitedly chanted "Leee-rics! Leee-rics! Leee-rics!!!"), why, we'll be able to follow the notes with our eyes as we sing the tune! There will be solid black notes and circled white ones, some with flags, some without, and you'll see how they match the words we'll be singing, how some are short, and some held longer, how some pih…pih…"

"Pitch! Pitch!!" a budding musician proclaimed confidently.

"…Ha! Yes! Exactly! Pitch! Some notes are written high because the sound is high. And the others…"

"Low! Low!" another lover of the arts added.

"Somebody's been learning!" the delighted instructor continued. "Yes. Low notes are written low on the scay… the scay…"

"Scale! Scale!" a future patron of the arts bellowed.

"Scale. Low notes are written low and high notes are written high! And next year (a few cognoscenti clapped their hands in anticipation and relief: They were perfectly satisfied with their guru and would brook no other) I'll teach you about the flags. Here's a hint: The shorter the note sounds, I mean, the less time it lasts, the more flags it gets! See if you notice that."

And without further instruction, having planted her seeds, she flipped open the keyboard cover, played a brief improvised introduction and launched into her vocal solo, the students' eyes riveted to their papers, ears intent on the clarity and articulation of her church-grown, choir-fueled contralto, now playful and joyous, then sad and mournful as the words mockingly lamented the demise of the narrator's grandfather- Alex never thought about his Dyedushka in that rude way- and the loyalty of his best ex-comrade, a clock that faithfully gave up its own tick-tock exactly when "the old man died," presumably to join him in the Great Beyond. The concept seemed rather silly to the reader of comic books, but he did not emit a squeak because the song had won the approval of the crowd and would, he sensed, in time become a classic.

Mrs. Philpot, tucked in her seclusion, was smiling. She didn't mind the leee-rics at all.

"Should have paid more mind to his own ticker," she solemnly reflected.

"Next week we'll sing it together, but today we still have time for 'Swanee' and 'The Blue Tail Fly' before Flutophone. Which would you prefer first?" Miss Messina inquired though she very well knew that the outcome would be coin-flip dependent, given a similar number of fans on both sides. And as she expected, the crowd roared its choices, the coin spun and "The Fly" hatched supreme. The students directed their attention to the written music, the pianist tinkled four improvised bars and the ensemble, sucking a collective breath at the signal of her hand and the commanding look in her eye, all began on the upbeat, mostly in the same key, the girls singing high, the boys singing… somewhat less high:

"When I was young, I used to wait, on Massa handing him his plate,

I'd pass the jug when he got dry, and brush away the blue tail fly.

Jimmy crack corn, and I don't care. Jimmy crack corn, and I don't care.

Jimmy crack corn, and I don't care, 'ol Massa's gone away."

Nobody, not Alex nor the other children, not even Miss Messina, noticed the wry expression that settled on the somehow reddened face of the dark-skinned adult in the room. She was intimately familiar with 'ol Massa, his gluttony, his drunkenness, his lechery, his hounds, his cracking whip.

"You go on now, Jimmy. You go on and you do the crackin' this time. Go on now and crack us some more of your corn- sure's a lot more comforting than what 'ol Massa's been cracking."

The song flowed on, the children as unaware of Mrs. Philpot's impressions as Miss Messina was:

"One day he rode around the farm, the flies so numerous they did swarm,

One chanced to bite him on the thigh. The Devil take the blue tail fly!"

"Brother Devil!" Mrs. Philpot blasphemed in her silent corner.

"The pony run, he jump, he pitch, and tumble Massa in the ditch.

He died, and the jury wondered why.

The verdict was the blue tail fly!"

"Couldn't convict Jimmy for lack of evidence," she triumphantly harumphed, "and see who's doing the crackin' now." And a moment later laconically added, "Yessir. It was Jimmy all the time." For Mrs. Philpot, justice had been served.

The song ended with an improvised piano flourish and the crowd howled its uproarious approval. A certain gratified look graced Mrs. Philpot's generally neutral countenance. Her ancestors, her very own grandmother, had survived Massa's inhumanity. She could not forgive black folk who found comfort living under his yoke.

Miss Messina pressed forward:

"My goodness, but that was so fine! I am indeed proud of you! Let's do a quick "Swanee" because it's getting to brillig and we still have Flutophone practice ahead of us."

Part of Miss Messina's appeal was the unusual vocabulary she deployed. Nobody knew what "brillig" was, but everyone remembered the word because she used it, because she was thrilled by it, so they filed it away in the dusty corner of the brain until the day they would encounter it again. Years later they would remember their classmates, their classroom, Mrs. Philpot who tried so hard. They would remember the word and recall their childhood, lost and irretrievable as yesterday's breath, that passed into adulthood before they ever noticed the pupa had hatched.

"Are you ready?" she continued. "Do you have 'Swanee River' open?" and receiving confirmation, repeated the same process she had employed with "The Fly." The four-bar introduction complete, her hand waved the signal; the choir drew air together and wistfully intoned:

"Way down upon the Swanee River, far, far away,

That's where my heart is yearning ever, home where the old folks stay."

"No sir," asserted Mrs. Philpot's inner voice, "that's not where this old folk is a-going to stay."

"All up and down this whole creation, sadly I roam.

I'm still longin' for that old plantation,

Oh, for the old folks at home."

"Why ever in the world would I want to return to Plantation #1 when I'm already stuck plenty enough here on Plantation #2?" Mrs. Philpot rebelliously, silently, suggested. She knew enough about that old world from her grandmother who had been born a slave, seen Freedom come, and suffered through the blessings of Reconstruction.

The singers performed the repetitions and continued:

"All the world is sad and dreary, everywhere I roam,

Oh, Darkies, how my heart grows weary, far from the old folks at home."

Hearing this cold, familiar word, Mrs. Philpot choked just as she had done throughout her long life whenever any label, well-intentioned or not, was applied to her or her people. There were many forms of address appended to her race and she did not approve of any of them.

The class ended the tune with a solemn fade-out:

"Far from the old folks at home. Far from the old folks at home…"

"The farther, the better," she inevitably concluded.

Miss Messina had purposely chosen this progression. The coin-flip had been rigged. She had wanted to end the common singing on a serious tone so that the Flutophone segment would be taken in the same vein: thoughtfully, academically, by the book, and experience had shown her that this spirit could best be accomplished with "Swanee." She had more control over that mad riot than her apparent liberalism suggested. Mrs. Philpot would have been impressed by this manipulative, calculated strategy had she been cognizant of it, but she was as unaware of her colleague's nuanced methodology as Miss Messina was of her own.

"That was simply supeeeeerb!" she purred. "And your fade-outs are improving wonderfully! You'll be performing at Carnegie Hall soon!" She tended to dramatize any success. "And the fade is so important! Because it's the last note, the note the audience will always remember." Here she wrinkled her forehead and paused thoughtfully. "Do you remember the other most important note?" and several hands went up to make that fundamental insight:

"The first! The first! The first!!!" several artists roared in unity, and Miss Messina, having briefly interrupted the sequencing of her presentation, knew she would have to restore focus from the wild response it had engendered, or the Flutophone might just as well be left in its case, the case being the cardboard box it came packaged in. She continued, sotto voce, knowing perfectly well that her charges would follow her lead:

"You're right: The first and last are the most important notes! They stick out like an elephant's ears, so people remember them. Many listeners won't notice an error in between- but they always pay attention to the first and last more than any other. That's the fickle public for you!"

“Fick-kle!!” Alex liked the sound of the word. He wondered what it meant.

“So, let’s take out our horns and see what we can do with them!”

Surely the Board of Education had done the children a remarkable service when in its wisdom and generosity it mandated Flutophone instruction in the town’s Fourth Grade music curriculum. With this simple inclusion, every student had a chance to learn to play a musical instrument, an experience that might otherwise never have been available to them. A tapering, white plastic recorder with a flaring trumpet bell and glowing red mouthpiece, the Flutophone opened doors that might otherwise have remained forever sealed. Its seven finger-holes and solitary spit valve thumbhole settled whether a child would be drawn to play an instrument, perhaps for a lifetime’s pleasure. And though technical proficiency was a just objective, Flutophone instruction conveyed two of the Board’s most compelling and subtle underlying motifs: Know thyself- and if you’ve got it, use it; To thyself be true- for every man needs to admit his weaknesses as well as his strengths.

The formal lessons included elementary music theory, basic ear training and technique, the same instruction music students receive with a viola or guitar or French horn if the instrument were available. Poor children who had no access to one could become skilled musicians- Flutophonists to start- if music spoke to them. And the improvisors, the natural composers and jazzers, could create their own tunes and interpretations as playfully as they could whistle without needing to understand a bit of Miss Messina’s lessons. Seventy-five cents was the subsidized price.

The instrument produced one octave, the chromatic scale in the kindly key of C. The cardboard box it came packed in- its “case”- contained a 4 by 7-inch instruction sheet, which, with its “complete” directions, finger-charts, and chromatic scale on the front, advertising on its back, revealed all the arcane secrets required to read and play music in that range. Once mastered, musicianship derived from Flutophone study was applicable to any other instrument.

Miss Messina removed her own Flutophone from its durable, clear vinyl carrying bag with reinforced edges and tuck-in flap. This horn was like everyone else’s- perhaps more hygienic from obsessive scrubbing. That it was no different was key. Hers was no trick pony for an unskilled rider. She had no special advantage. No, it was the same “student” model they each held, and it was a direct, bold challenge to them: She would demonstrate to her astonished, inspired minions exactly what they could achieve with this apparent toy. If they worked on it. If they thought about it.

She lifted the axe to her lips, exchanged her customary slouch for proper lung-filling posture, over-dosed on air and played the first perfect, soft note of “Prelude to a Kiss.” The fascinated children focused. She continued the sweet ballad, teased out nuances, improvised intelligently and emotively, spoke sense to them and having told the story without the encumbrance of words, ended on the perfect note.

“Why, that sounds like Mr. Ben Webster himself playing on Mr. Ellington’s record!” Mrs. Philpot, thrilled by the insight, declared to herself.

And just when the tune ended, as they were still recovering from the ballad’s soft, expectant mood, Miss Messina lit into the “William Tell Overture” in full-throttle fortissimo, with bandsman showmanship, triple-tonguing the ta-ka-ta’s with gusto and metronomic speed and precision- no introverted ballad this- demonstrating to all with ears this alternate side of the Flutophone’s personality. She improvised a few concluding bars and ended on a note so long they feared she might

collapse, but circular breathing and her seeming effortless mastery had barely reddened her complexion.

"Mercy me! And Mr. Charlie Parker too!" Mrs. Philpot was not a music critic, but she knew what she liked.

"Please take out your instruments and prepare to play," she commanded through the tumult of applause and cheers. "We'll continue to 'Row,' just like we did before: I'll play a series of notes. After I finish, you imitate them while reading your music… any questions?" Alex had at least one but kept it to himself. No other musician felt any need to delay the concert.

"Let's tune up first. Push your mouthpiece all the way into your horn." She paused to be sure everyone had done so. "That's the way. Now pull it out about as wide as a pencil, and listen, listen, listen to my pitch. Try to make yours sound the same as mine when I tell you to blow. (A grinning few always found that turn of phrase amusing.) It will be the third space "C," just like always. Then we'll play 'Row' in parts: me first, then you, over and over until it's just so. Lastly, we'll assemble the parts into the whole song."

She struck a piano key, conformed her own mouthpiece to the sound, put it to her full, waxy, bright-red lips, breathed deeply, blew from her diaphragm and held that long "C" until she was sure its quality had filled their minds and memory. Then she signaled them to try that first all-imposing note on the exact downbeat; one, two, three: Play! And when the travesty was over, she thought with relief that the monster they had awakened was becoming tamer by the week. There were clams, sure, misbegotten toots and squeaks, but fewer than before, and almost all the children had started- and ended!- at the same time. They were learning! She was pleased. She understood the logistical impossibility of a proper tune-up, but there were other, more significant issues now, and someday, someday…

"Good enough for jazz!" she quipped.

Mrs. Philpot snorted to herself in agreement. She understood that is the way musicians talk.

"I'll play the first three identical notes. No finger changes! Then you'll repeat them. Listen, listen, listen as carefully as you can. You must hear it in your mind if you're going to make it perfect for the ear and sweet for the soul." And with these concluding insights, she played the first three notes of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," tonguing each one carefully, avoiding any mushy slurring. When she finished her part, she counted "One; Two; Three: Play!" And they mostly started together. "Again! One; Two; Three: Play!" She repeated the process until she was reasonably satisfied with the group effort.

"Row, row, row works. Now let's try the following two different notes that match 'your boat": one for 'your' and one for 'boat.' Check the fingering chart if you can't remember where your fingers are supposed to go. Now listen, listen, listen!"

And with that fine advice, she played those two notes simply and clearly three times before she felt they were ready to try it themselves. "I'll count to three like before- and you come in at four, when I say 'play.' Just like we did last week. After we finish, we'll put all five notes together. Ready?"

They were. She counted; they tooted, over and over until "your boat" emerged from a foggy sea and clunked into port.

"Ready to put the notes together?" she continued. Of course they were. "I'll play first, as usual. Then the orchestra shall perform!" And she, true to her method, played the five notes and

completed the phrase, remembering regretfully that she had forgotten to emphasize their listening carefully. When she felt they were saturated, she had them perform as before.

"Did you notice that you play 'row, row, row' when your foot hits the floor? You played these three notes on what we call the 'downbeat.' The downbeat, when your toe touched the ground. But what happened when you played 'your'? Was your foot on the floor?"

A chorus of "no's" rang out, the children excited to share this new revelation.

"So where was your foot when you played 'your'?"

"It was up! It was up! It was up!!" they cried, thrilled to please their favorite teacher.

"Right again! It really was up this time- not down, like the downbeat when your toes touched the floor. So here's the big question: Put on your thinking caps and concentrate! If the downbeat is when your foot is down, what do we call the beat when the foot is up?"

The instruction was getting technical. She wasn't sure how far she could go into slipping the up and down-beat concept into this unsyncopated Fourth Grade mix, but there didn't seem to be any damage done from her previous seed implants, and when she heard three students blare "Upbeat! Upbeat! Upbeat!!" she felt relieved and secure in her approach. A few of the more intuitive participants had already thought about the opening note of "The Blue Tail Fly" that was played when the foot was up. Miss Messina wore the halo of confidence. There would be no stopping her. Music was her cause, and the children were her beneficiaries.

This was Miss Messina's grand method, her epistemology and inspiration. She used it to get all the way to "life is but a dream," and did so merrily, merrily, merrily.

Lesson complete, performance over, Mrs. Philpot joined her colleague, formally thanked her (and when she did so, the class cheered and clapped its approval) and pointed out Alex, the new student who would need a Flutophone. The two women approached the boy.

"So nice to meet you, Alexander," she sought his evasive eyes, "I'm Miss Messina, and I'll get you your Flutophone by next week. It will cost seventy-five cents and you can have a new mouthpiece if you chew through the one you get. Have you ever played before?"

Alex stuttered a tentative "Nuh, nuh, no," but his lack of musicianship was the least of his problems: Those seventy-five cents had become an instant, worrisome obsession. Where would he get this impossible sum?

"I wonder if the Flutophone will cure his speech impediment?" the crafty Miss Messina theorized. "Lip and tongue coordination might do the trick. And the embouchure he develops will certainly help. Hmmm…" And with that, after what seemed her third encore, she snatched up her gear and portfolio, and ta-ta'd the class a fond adieu until next week's command performance.

Mrs. Philpot liked Miss Messina. She did not hold the "darkie" reference against her at all. She could sympathize with all dark-skinned folk, including Italians. They too knew how it felt to be non-Caucasian, and if they chose to pass in the wide, white world, well, good for them- it was fine by her. Lots of her own people did the same thing. It was a matter of survival and did nobody any harm.

The sun had made its way to the other side of the building. Fireworks ended; Roman candles flickered softly and the fluttering maple leaves had lost their brilliant sheen. 'Twas brillig. Time to wind down. It had been an energy sapping day. Mrs. Philpot congratulated the scholars on their

exertions, reminded them to study, study, study, escorted them to their assigned exits, sent them packing to their respective Xanadu's.

This time it was a glowing Zina who spotted Alex in the herd first, and shortly, with a bounce of her pigtails and a skip of her toesies, was at his side grinning broadly, bursting with a wonderful secret that she, an over-boiling 2-cup percolator, could restrain no longer. She had spent their few hours of separation pondering (Alex wasn't the only one thinking in that family) the most anodyne and least provocative solution to the problem of milk funding, and how to approach Gregori with the issue.

The answer had presented itself during Art Class, the Third-Grade complement to Miss Messina's music route, while the aesthetes were learning to make greeting cards for any occasion. Hers- that budding proto-minx! - would be a Daddy Dearest tribute: Words of gratitude and affection for Dear Poppa who had made this wonderful new life possible, lovingly and bountifully expressed inside, a clever, neatly executed cover drawing in crayon of Zina, Alex and herself holding hands in the foreground, new home in the background, parents' supportive profiles in adjoining windows. It was a magic talisman that would deliver a simple wish. The ploy: A formal, pompous presentation to kindly paternoster with the fruit of the day's endeavors, the card and its full acknowledgement of her parents' role in their newly acquired happiness and success. Finally, a humble pitch. She was greasing the wheels so the milk wouldn't squeak. She was almost 8 years old.

"Oh Poppa!" she would feign, "I almost forgot to tell you about the milk!" to which a daughter-spoiled and manipulated Gregori would reasonably and rationally respond, "Moloko? Kakoye moloko?" and she'd launch into her explanation how at Oldhall children had milk-break between classes in the morning. It cost two cents for each carton (she wouldn't say "subsidized"); Alex and she would need ten cents every week. She was deeply sorry, but that's the way things were at Oldhall. What could she do? She promised to drink only the whole.

Her ingenious card was surely the balm for his ire. She radiated confidence. During Art Class that afternoon, she had freed her talented hands at the invocation of Miss Messina's counterpart, and guided by the Muse and her concern for Alex, produced a work that won the approval and cheers of both peers and adults. Mrs. Lord was so pleased with Zoya's creation- especially with the incipient subtlety of the lines she had drawn, the unexpected technical proficiency, her sense of perspective: Why, the children's heads were tilted in a natural, life-like pose and the parents' profiles rendered so convincingly realistic! And the drawing had such an emergent, three-dimensional feel, that during the art exhibit that followed, she held up the new student's work for all to acknowledge and praise. But the card's interior was blank, an empty but magnificent purse. Mrs. Lord, that helpful completionist, was determined to finish the masterpiece, to fill it with treasure.

"What sentiment are you trying to express by showing your siblings and you standing before your house, Zoya?" she asked, and Zoya, hearing the phrase "your house" for her first time, shocked by the wealth it suggested and the status it conferred, wondering who those "sib-lings" were, she-poor girl!- could almost huff and puff a hazy "pa…pa…pa… Pop" in response.

But that was enough to engender sympathy, the first stirrings of loyalty and devotion to her from the small fry and their keepers: The great artist, their new ally and collaborator, had a limitation and needed their willing help now that she was on the same cloud they inhabited. They would supply the words.

"Pop, Pop, Pop!" The third graders echoed sympathetically.

“It’s for her father!” they cheered enthusiastically.

“Pop, Pop, Pop!” They said it many more times than that.

Mrs. Lord stepped in. “I’ll bet you can come up with a clever rhyme using ‘Pop’,” she suggested. “Greeting cards often have poems in them.” And that’s what the wordsmiths did, finally settling on “Pops, You’re Tops!” to everyone’s uninhibited delight.

But Zoya’s greatest triumph was yet to come. After class, a deeply bronzed classmate, a fellow-artist, a humble Salieri, pressed an envelope she had neatly crafted from light-blue construction paper into Zoya’s talented little hand.

“For your pee-chur,” gracious Carmella offered. The gift was accepted, a life-bond of friendship forged. Carmella would be Zoya’s confidant and ally, a supplicant at her altar.

Gregori’s hands and a mutual problem had made Zoya friends that first day, with but few malcontents demurring among themselves. And she would doubtlessly save her older brother from another unpleasant domestic incident.

An anxious inspection convinced Alex: If there had been no special disasters at his job, if Gregori would arrive home in his usual daily funk rather than self-pitying, frustrated rage over his status and employment (Alex could not have known the details behind his father’s ill moods then, but experience had taught him what to expect), if Lydia had no complaints, then Zoya’s greeting card and attendant pitch might be the proper approach. There were a lot “if’s” and anything could go haywire; still, the plan was better than winging it and simply hoping for the best. Yes, he reaffirmed his conviction: Zoya was a little sister worthy of his protection, which would extend from Hill to Hall.

Lydia had been busying herself with little Zina when they got home. The brother and sister greeted her with customary kisses and acute, furtive observation. Her mood would set the tone for the evening. If she was upset with her day, no other issue could be addressed rationally or profitably with her or her similarly afflicted husband. So, it was essential to evaluate her spiritual state before launching into Zoya’s sly economic grift. But they were in luck: Lydia appeared safely defused if not particularly happy or radiantly ecstatic, and wily, helpful Zoya, adding what little cheer she could, declared she would join her mother in scullery duty just as soon as she changed out of her school outfit.

There was no place for Alex in the kitchen. Nothing was expected of him save his absence. When commanded, Alex did chores reluctantly and incompletely. His hands fumbled uselessly and destructively. He could best keep the peace and be most productive by simply disappearing, and that is exactly what he did do, a pattern that he adopted and would consistently adhere to throughout his growing years.

No, Hall had no alleys he could side-step, no foyers or garages to duck into as had Hill. No, Hall offered a different form of invisibility. Across the street from their house, still undeveloped into public housing, sat Water Company property: a granite hill topping several wooded acres, an abandoned, barbwire fenced reservoir capping its tip. Its shadowy woods would become the boy’s chosen sanctuary, and it was here he retired to await Gregori’s homecoming.

On this cloudless day, the sky that winked to him cheerfully through the tangle of branches above his head was mid-afternoon crisp, blue and pristine. The loamy earth, still damp from the night’s sustaining rain, was carpeted with last Fall’s leaves. As he stepped on them, the earth released the loamy, expectant fragrance of springtime reawakening. This was urban woodland,

limited in scale, its scent more like toilet water than deep timberland perfume, but the overall effect was exotic to his senses. It bolstered his spirit and drove his exploration.

As the city boy hiked, he heard for the first time the chickadee's wistful "fee-bee," the busy clatter of the hammering woodpecker. Crows cawed from their roosts in the treetops. Rowdy squirrels chattered and chased each other frantically, and their chipmunk cousins joined in breaking the peaceful stillness with their madcap carousing. He lifted a rock and observed a worm. A garter snake, alarmed by his footsteps, rapidly slithered into nearby underbrush. He saw a black, yellow-spotted salamander watching him with the tranquility of the Buddha. Here, high above the tallest chimneys of the homes below, just a faded hum of distant street traffic reminded him of the world he came from, but the wind swept the leafy branches with a comforting rustle and no human voices disturbed his meditations. It was all so different from the grime and squalor of Laurel. His chest swelled with fresh prospects of rebirth. Here was a chance to begin anew. Overwhelmed, he paused to catch his breath.

Close by, the sticky green cones of a white pine hung in bright Christmas ornament clusters. They lured him like the fruit of Eden. He patted the tree's rough bark and offered a prayerful reflection of gratitude for making its acquaintance. A tree like this would be a good friend, generous with the stubbly beauty of its mature cones. He could gather a bagful and perhaps make a bristly brown wreath out of them. Some wire from a coat hanger. Some string. A little glue… But he had lost himself in time. The sinking sun was bearing a message: time to face the inevitable that he had managed to temporarily disregard. He had to backtrack. He had to rush.

As he was making his way back home, Poppa had just pulled into the driveway, wondering petulantly why nobody was waiting to open the gate for him. He had put in another exhausting, demeaning day at the factory. A little consideration, especially from that self-centered slacker of his, might not ease the burden, but at least show some respect for the sacrifices he, as head of the family, made every day. It was as if the boy purposefully avoided him, after all he was doing for his children. Yet here was his reward: Gregori would have to get out of the car, open the gate, crawl back into the car, when someone- he meant Alex- could, with little effort, have made his homecoming so much more welcoming and pleasant by that simple accommodation. He didn't understand why his only son- he grudgingly admitted the parentage- was so withdrawn, so recalcitrant. He hardly ever volunteered to help with anything, and when commanded, the results rarely passed the quality-control inspector's high standards. The boy was a zhlobe. Useless. Undependable. Incompetent. Thankless. "That's what you get…" he almost blamed himself.

Ah!- but Zoyatchka!... She was different. A perfect dochka! A krahsahveetsa! Uncomplaining, helpful, a volunteer, a team player, never any trouble. And those wonderful, competent hands! The apple- and what an apple it was!- didn't fall far from this tree. As for the boy, who knows what he had dropped out of. If only he hadn't… but he had: and so, guilty as charged, Gregori resigned himself to yet more drudgery. He would have to open the gate and unload the trunk himself, no thanks to Alex, and get its on-loan cargo into the security of the house. Gregori had significant construction plans for the weekend and the router he had borrowed from a friendly co-worker was the last tool he required for accomplishing them properly.

He was preoccupied with these thoughts when he heard Zoya's greeting emerging from the grape arbor's Quonset depths.

"Well, what did I tell you?" he triumphantly concluded as she came into view, but what he said was "Where's your brother? He's supposed to help me unload the car."

Had he turned around, he would have seen the boy running toward him. But what he said just in time for Alex to hear was, “I can’t depend on him for anything.” Zoya, seeing Alex before her father did, just laughed good-naturedly and pointed out that he was right behind him, reaching out, in fact, to carry the router to the house.

“Nyet, nyet, nyet, oh no you don’t,” Gregori greeted his son. “You’ll drop the thing and smash it and I’ll have to pay for it. I’ll carry it myself.” And, removing Alex’s grasping fingers, he did carry the tool, silently, still petulantly, all the way to the house. He wasn’t going to take any chances with valuable property, borrowed or not. He had witnessed the shiftless, spastic boy fumble many, many times before. No- he had to do the careful work himself. Just keep out of the way and stop crowding me- this was the most the boy could do, the best way he could make himself useful. The kid simply didn’t have the concentration or dedication a worthy cause like this required. And he was lazy. Just what was so fascinating anyway about those stupid books he should probably have thrown out long ago? Yes, he should have, but then the boy would whine. He’d cry. He’d demand to know why. He’d tell Babushka and Dyedushka despite his command that family business was never to be discussed outside the house. And he’d have more time to pursue his chief avocation: mischief. No, better to leave things as they are- but what a disappointment! Again, his fundamental invective flashed by: “That’s what you get…” although he could not really blame himself.

Lydia, perfumed by boiling cabbage, holding little Zina by the hand, met her husband at the kitchen door. She didn’t appear “truck-you-lent” at all. Her day had gone smoothly: the children had been enrolled, the lunches prepared, and supper was ready. This time Gregori would not have to demand his food. It was awaiting his pleasure.

And pleasure there would be: Zoya had made certain of that. That green borscht was somehow smoother- and less bitter- than usual. (Had she surreptitiously added sugar?) The buns were fresh and steamy from the oven; the salty butter was soft and sweet. And the kasha’s bouillon cube dressing had been displaced by a secret, improvised sauce that Zoya, the resident gourmet, had scrounged from a can of concentrated mushroom soup. This would be good eating- and the likeliest expedient to appeal to Gregori’s generosity.

They entered by way of the kitchen door, past the pots of borscht and kasha steaming on the stove, the children to the sink, hands and faces to scrub, the father, encumbered by his load, through the adjacent dining room, then into the den with its basement door, down its creaky, scalloped steps to his underground workbench. He was snorting to begin his weekend project- and it was already Thursday! Luan, 2-by’s and 1-by’s, decorative trim and dowels turned to resemble braided rope carefully stacked against the wall. Color-matched finishing nails tempting him to pound. Brass hinges and screws, latches and fittings, hardware for the doors and drawers, the furniture-maker’s jewelry. Capped Mason jars queued on the shelf with their packets of Constantine’s water-soluble wood stain. The reposing miter-box and its partner, the fine-toothed specialty saw that produced a clean, precise cut at any angle. The bench grinder and wet-stones that kept the tools so razor-sharp that they seemed to slide effortlessly through the wood, the way the prow of a ship cuts through the sea. Brilliant, those Craftsman tools that fit his hand so well- a gift from Lydia- neat in their proper places on the bench, like yelping puppies that had been caged all day awaiting his call. Yes, those Sears tools were brilliant, but finer was that mis-matched set of old-world chisels and scoops- why, it even boasted a Buck, a Kirschen and an Emmerich- the German-steel carving knives and odd-sized hand planes (including a Stanley rabbet) that Dyedushka had been gathering for him, one-by-one, as thrift store or tag sale opportunities presented themselves. Finally, the kindly co-worker’s router and decorative bits to give the edges precision and style. It had taken three months- and more help from Dyedushka- to save enough money to build his see-through, built-in bookcase cabinet that would

take the place of the wall separating den and living room and become the focal point of family communion. And it was only affordable because Gregori had realized in a grand moment of inspiration that the unfinished but unblemished backside of the cheapest, least attractive pre-finished paneling- the luan to which was adhered the tacky, synthetic abomination Americans seemed to prize so much- could be used to front his project. He'd panel the cabinet bookcase in luan- and hang the critics when they concluded that he didn't know the front from the back. The result would be proof and justification. Gregori was plagued by no doubt whatsoever because he could visualize the completed project, paneled both ways, in his mind. And so could the hard-headed nay-sayers if they could unpack their heads and set them free… but what can one expect from the brain-washed? The prefabricated side was good enough for them.

Gregori considered himself a cabinetmaker. Anyone could be a carpenter.

"Grisha! Gri-i-i-i-isha!! Dinner's on the table!" He had been lost in his dreams there in his subterranean kingdom, forgetting that he hadn't eaten since bagged lunch 5 hours previously.

That was his state of mind when the light-blue envelope set next to his soup bowl beckoned. He lifted it gingerly, and grinning, shook it mock-cautiously as though it were booby-trapped, eager but wary to guess the contents. He arched his eyebrows, and his mouth became a tight ring. Everyone smiled. He placed the envelope against his ear and listened intently. Everyone laughed. Satisfied there was no ticking, he let his gifted fingers do the surgeon's job of opening the neatly made envelope without tearing it apart- it was too nice to disrespect- and the card itself, whose authorship he had already divined, slipped into his hand.

Gregori Gavrilovich had another special talent that had been suppressed by a lifetime of distraction and deprivation: He was a most competent art forger. There were few illustrations or paintings he could not make a workmanlike copy of- and he could paint any subject realistically, portraits included, from photographs. The symbolism and metaphor of abstract art, however, was gibberish to him. It made no sense to be vague. An artist had to boldly state his message. Furthermore, this "modernism" had no subtlety, no nuance. The crude lines, the car-wreck perspective, offended his taste. And here his child, his Zoyatchka, was making his very own point with her rendition of the three children, clearly delighted with their new home, nothing vague or "abstract" about them with their tipped heads and grateful expressions. This was not good art because the child artist- his child artist- had drawn and imagined it: This was good art because it stated clearly what it meant. And her technique! How old was she again? He slowly, slowly opened it and with the dramatic, stylized expression of an overwhelmed art critic, peeked inside and thoughtfully read the inscription: "Pops You're Tops!"

"Shto eto 'Tops is Pops' delo?" he demanded, introducing a tone that would require mollification. "What has happened to your Russian?"

"We made cards in Art Class today, Poppa. I wanted to write it in Russian, but the teacher said it had to be in English and the whole class helped me write it." Here she hesitated just a wee bit, to take a breath and gather herself, "And Poppa, please don't be upset: I didn't make the envelope. My friend (she already has a friend, thought Gregori) Carmella made it."

Gregori smiled. His daughter had the proper attitude. "I knew you didn't make that shabby thing," he told her, and they all laughed together, a solid, united family laugh because everyone recognized her ability and high standards: The envelope was presentable enough, but Zoya had already engineered two improvements.

“And by the way, Poppa, the school has a milk break every morning between classes,” she forged on, “The milkman delivers a crate to each class and the children drink it at their desks.”

Pops did not correct her implication that children drink crates at their desks. He began thinking about the expense Mr. Jacobs, his friendly co-worker who had lent him the router, bore educating that scholarship winning son of his and how lucky he was personally to have been spared so cheaply with his own children. He hadn’t spent an extra nickel at Hill, but it did make sense that Hall had higher expectations which might require remuneration.

“How much?” he asked.

“Ten cents,” she answered.

“Ten cents!!” he gasped. A single pack of cigarettes cost twenty-five pennies back then. This extravagance represented four packs, if Alex was to be included.

“A week,” she quickly reasoned.

“And this includes you?” he demanded of his son, somewhat relieved. The math was now in his favor.

“Da,” was the boy’s response.

Gregori’s mathematical mind grasped that the all-inclusive weekly sum of twenty cents- a nickel short of a pack of cigarettes- wouldn’t break the family till. What troubled him most was the slippery slope such demands could lead to. What was next? Uniforms? Class trips? Sports equipment? Cafeteria food, which even he could not allow himself? How could he put money away when they were constantly spending it? And Lydia had to stay home with Zina. The time would come when she would be freed up to get a job, not at the shirt factory, but hopefully- if she learned her English- as a clerk at a bank, to help with the bills. But that would not be for a few years. In the meantime, whether the family ate depended on him: logic and practicality demanded conservative family economics. Soon enough there would be a little extra. But until then he had to hang tough for everybody’s welfare.

“I’ll think about it,” he said. Alex’s head dropped. “Maybe.”

“But Poppa!” Zoya continued patiently, “All the children have milk at this school. We’d be the only ones not to. Today was our first day.” And she set loose that look of puzzled helplessness. It told her father that she was in a tight spot and was counting on him. He was not supposed to let her down.

“And I suppose you had milk today as well,” he turned to Alex, avoiding his daughter’s tell-tale eyes. His severe tone suggested that no permission for extraneous guzzling had been granted, freeing him, in his own mind, of any financial obligation. Besides, they already got milk for breakfast. With their cereal.

“Da,” came the inevitable response. He had actually gone through two cartons, but there was no wisdom in mentioning that.

“You should have declined it. Did I give you permission?” He believed that the question was reasonable. Parents- you know, the ones who pay for everything- not children, make the important decisions. This child’s attitude was leading toward another slippery slope: This is how rebellions begin. He was going to shut that down before it exploded.

“We all did. Everyone in school did,” Zoya interrupted. “This is the way they do it at Hall. Everybody gets milk between second and third periods.” She flashed that helpless, hopeful look again. And remembering his regular invectives against the poison of luxury, she added, “I just had the regular moloko, not the chocolate or strawberry.”

“And you?” Gregori grilled Alex. Zoya was softening him, but he needed to keep the edge.

“Me too,” Alex lied, holding his head prayerfully down. The prayer was that he had removed all the pink stains from his shirt thoroughly.

It was here that salvation came from an unexpected source. Three-year-old Zina, delighted with the sound of the word “moloko,” had been playfully repeating it, “…molo, molo…mok, mok, mok!... molok, molok, molok- OHHH!!!” and in doing so had filled up with so much excessive air that her final “molok- OHHH!!!” came across as a massive molo-belch, like an airhorn with a bullfrog accent, that threatened to rattle the dishes, hilariously out of proportion with the tiny body that produced it. The children knew their table manners, but this had been so spontaneous and obviously innocent that even Gregori, despite himself, broke out in raucous, involuntary laughter.

“Well, Zina’s still so young,” Gregori thought to himself, “She has time to learn.” What he said, indicating Zoya was:

“What’s done is done. You can have your milk,” then directing his attention to Alex he added, “but that’s it. Don’t ask for anything else.”

Zoya’s triumphant under-the-table kick delivered to Alex’s shin punctuated her winning smile. The battle was over, mission accomplished. She didn’t know that for Alex and his Flutophone a potential source of funding had dried up, and worse, established a pattern for future abnegation. Still, he had a week. Tomorrow would be Friday. He had a weekend pass to spend with his grandparents. There was something in the air about the best being yet to come and in wanting to believe it, he did.

The purchase of a brand-new Flutophone would not be among Alex’s accomplishments during those three months preceding their first Hall summer vacation. Dyedushka had arrived that first post-concert Friday bearing a gift: a heavy, post-War, balloon-tired Columbia girl’s one-speed that he had purchased from Salvation Army and painted- pitted chrome included- the brightest silver imaginable. It was clumsy but reliable. Its tires held their air, and the brakes stopped it. Its pedals didn’t spin when he coasted, a significant engineering improvement over the circus bike he had first scraped his ankles on. His eight-year-old self could go anywhere on it with or without his parents’ permission. Henceforth he would not need Dyedushka’s Friday evening lift. He’d be on the twelve-mile, three-city road trip 10 minutes after school let out. But given such largesse, Alex would not ask either grandparent for anything extra, let alone an indulgence like musical patronage, though Babushka squeezed a quarter into his humid palm as she always did every weekend. He’d have to face Miss Messina with disappointment. He would not be able to participate, and he would fail again, as he had that time at Hill when Gregori reviewed his first report card.

“Shto etyee ‘C’s’ e ehtot ‘D’?” his father wanted to know.

“‘C’ means average,” the boy explained incompletely, “It’s the mark most people get.” In his mind, he was just trying to be like everyone else. He was not trying to stand out, to be exceptional. He just wanted to fit in. Or, barring socialization, become invisible.

That attitude earned him a cuff across the cheek. “Your job is not to be like everyone else. And what about this ‘D,’ in Arithmetic no less?”

Alex was deathly afraid of Gregori’s beatings. That cuff was a clear prelude. He began to shiver. He could feel his stomach churning. His head bent toward the ground and eyes focused on a worn patch of carpet between his feet. Would it be a sucker punch this time, he wondered, or would he be commanded to go into the basement and prepare himself for the belt?

He could tolerate the pain. But the loss of self-worth that he inevitably felt from being whipped by his own father, the one who was supposed to love and protect him, stung far more bitterly. The beatings would leave him exhausted in miserable shame and self-hatred. What was the point, after all, of any struggle if a loser like himself was bound to fail? Why trust his own initiative if he lacked even a spark of creativity and intelligence? How can any disappointment of a child, who disgraced his own parents, ever expect to fit into a family, be accepted and loved? He was an unwelcome stranger in his own home.

His ‘many virtues of mediocrity’ ploy had been ill-inspired. And now he had to explain his mathematical shortcomings to this enraged, indignant bull. His breathing came out in gasps. His pulse quickened and he could feel sweaty moisture from the heat of his neck and palms. He focused on the worn patch of carpet, escaping his father’s incensed glare.

“Ya… uh…uh… Ya starayoouc. Ya… Ya… eezvenyee mehnyah!” His stammering was not convincing. He was trying to promise to do better.

“Arithmetic is your most important subject and naturally your lowest grade. There is no excuse for this disgraceful, shameful performance. But in this failure, you are certainly being consistent. Here’s how you’re going to learn from now on,” and seizing one of the apples Babushka had Dyedushka deliver the weekend past, he let it fly across the width of the table striking Alex on the side of his forehead. Two days later, he was able to return to school, report card signed in Gregori’s immaculate penmanship.

So his Math, woefully inadequate and below the skill of his peers, would require attention. But how was he to obtain Flutophone financing? He needed fifty unobtainable cents. Babushka’s quarter, yet unspent on comic books, was still in his pocket. Not enough. Not enough.

But again, as always, he had overthought the situation. He was not the only poor boy on Miss Messina’s list of charitable cases. His situation was far from unique. Several other students in that class were playing former performers’ used and abandoned instruments. Next Thursday, when Miss Messina’s hand reached into her bookbag, she knew from his downturned eyes that he would be getting the one with the chipped bell. It played perfectly well despite the blemish.

“I’ll have a new mouthpiece for you next week,” she promised. “They’re on order.” And with that, the issue was resolved. Miss Messina never mentioned that she had been funding those mouthpieces ever since starting her “route.”

Yes, the Flutophone issue had been settled, and along with it there were other successes and triumphs for sister and brother during those three months preceding their first Hall summer vacation. Zoya’s artwork had expanded to clothing design and Lydia was teaching her how to sew. Soon her legs would grow a bit longer and she’d be using her mother’s machine to create her and Carmella’s own fashions. And Alex had not fared badly either. He had learned his tables, coached by Mrs. Philpot, who was convinced that memory was strongest when based on logical sense, and whose apple never left her desktop.

“You know why they call it the ‘times’ table, Alexander?” Mrs. Philpot prompted during the first of the many afternoon sessions she had, soon after recognizing his need, insisted he attend. He shook his head and grunted an unwilling “no.” Other than Mrs. Rosenthal and his grandparents, he had avoided adults, especially newly met ones. And Mrs. Philpot was no exception. Besides, her exotic blackness was bound to make her different from the few who had shown him affection and kindness. Singling him out before his peers for extra help or whatever reason she had in mind, punitive or not, was a shameful announcement to them that he was inadequate and not up to their standard, that he was different and did not fit in. How could he ever trust her after she did that?

Why couldn’t he be left alone in peace? Given time, he’d figure things out on his own.

Mrs. Philpot was not one to be discouraged by an uncooperative attitude. Well acquainted with that spirit, she forged on relentlessly.

“Because multiplication is really the addition of the same number many ‘times.’ That’s the main idea to get into your head. For example, 2 times 3 is the same as 3 plus 3. See, boy? You added 3’s, but twice: two times.” She stopped to see if he had absorbed that telling point. “Times. As in the times table. Do you understand? You added two three’s. And you get the same answer either way. Six. Right?” Alex watched her brown hand skim across white paper as she deftly worked neat figures on a pad. She paused and waited patiently for his reaction.

He nodded begrudgingly that it was “right.” If he couldn’t remember his timesies, he could add to get the same result.

“And, you know, that’s why sometimes in class when I mean to ask what 3 times 7 is, why, I ask ‘What’s three sevens?’ See? 7 plus 7 plus 7. Three sevens. Same thing. Added or multiplied.” She wrote it all out for him again.

“Tventy-vun,” Alex murmured.

“Right! How do you like that, Alexander?” she said, grateful for any response at all from the reticent child.

Despite his insecurities, he had to acknowledge that he liked it. As a matter of fact, it wasn’t so awful at all. Her simple explanation made sense. How could he not have figured out something so plainly reasonable earlier?

He felt the flush of joy that comes with the abrupt understanding of a puzzle long unsolved. This happiness was not new to him: it had happened before, many times, while studying his comics. There had been plots to unravel, words to decipher, inevitably accompanied by flashes of delight when he knew positively that he was on the right track resolving them. Private and unshared, these successes had always come when he was alone. But here was this dark stranger passing him a simple key and praising him for using it properly. Now the boy understood the alternate route: Addition. He could memorize the tables, intelligently, as Mrs. Philpot had demonstrated, not blindly as he had in the past. He felt his initial misgivings fading. He was becoming inspired:

“And if I mistake seven three’s, answer will be same?” He still wasn’t sure which number should be added.

Mrs. Philpot was fluent in gibberish. She helped him state his case properly:

“Why yes, Alexander. Three sevens is the same as seven three’s! Let’s work the figures out on paper.” They did so. Lucky 21 both times. “Do you know what that means, Alexander?”

Understanding this basic, suggestive concept was a significant leap into fundamental mathematical insight. “Hmmmm… I wonder if he knows what I’m a-thinking…” she reflected.

What could it mean? He was unsure, but her smile was warm.

“If I know three time seven, I know seven time three?” he cautiously ventured.

“Yes, yes, yes! And how is it helpful…?” she prompted.

“Easier mem- mem- memory for time table!” he triumphantly exclaimed. That had to be so. After all, three times seven is the same as seven times three. By learning one, you instantly know the other. And then, suddenly inspired, he remembered another idea he had come across.

“It like adding 2 plus 3. Same thing 3 plus 2. You say mul… mul… multply like add!”

“Yes, Alexander. Five each time.”

As the two sat by worn, blonde-oak desk, the constant sun blazed the last of her nurturing rays among the wind-blown leaves of the sentinel maples. They passed through the panels of glass, settled on the desktop scribblings, highlighted teacher and pupil with their radiant glow.

Mrs. Philpot was not, outwardly, a sentimentalist. Life experience had taught her to suppress her most personal reactions in the hostile world she inhabited. The pull on her soul at that moment, urging her to hold and caress this struggling white boy with her abundant motherly affection would have to wait for Heaven’s time. She did not kiss his forehead. She did not “lay her hand on his shoulder.”

But she could not deny him her brown eyes, deep and dark and resuscitative as a thirsty traveler’s beckoning well. They found and locked onto his for the few drawn-out seconds that spoke of everything she was feeling. Alex had seen the same ones in his white Babushka many times, felt them hold him close and deliver a mother’s uninhibited affection and pride.

“Yes, Honey. Memory and reason. I wish everyone possessed them…” she said in a voice that matched the darkness of her skin, warm and comforting as heartbeat in the womb.

She had stepped out of character. No harm done…

Their after-school sessions would continue for three more months. By the end of the school year, Alexander had conquered long division, and Mrs. Philpot had prepped him for fifth-grade decimals and fractions with Mr. Ardolino. Under her tutelage, the boy was becoming a junior mathematician. When it was time to assign a letter to his progress, Mrs. Philpot felt fully justified with his final grade of “A-“: her feelings for the boy had not influenced his average at all. Her only regret was that because his Hill scores had been so dismal, a full “A” or yes, an “A+” could not be.

But her active mind was already stirred. Now that he understood his times tables and division, he was ready for the next important step, and she was ripping with her compass and a gentle push:

“Now Alex,” she’d begin, “if you add a number to 3 and get 5, what was that number you added to 3?”

Alex, thoughtful, alert Alex, would light up like a Christmas tree. It was as natural to him as breathing.

“Now take a peek at the numbers you started with, 3 and 5. How can they help you get the answer?” This concept delved into methodology, but he’d come through- and use the idea to work with larger numbers.

“And what about if you subtracted a number from 10 and got 8 for an answer? What was that mystery number you subtracted?” she’d forge ahead. She knew he’d get that answer as well.

“So it is,” she’d agree, “Now look at the numbers you started with: 10 and 8. How can you use them to get the answer?” Again, more methodology. But he’d rise to it. She’d wait a week to let these concepts sink in. The formal equations could wait until later. There was no rush to introduce them: that was a mistake most teachers made. She was certain that it was best to start by tapping children’s innate mathematical intuitiveness. Those formal equations needed taming: they frightened and alienated youngsters. A proper informal introduction alleviated stress and bolstered confidence. And it was much more fun.

A week would pass, and she’d resume sweetening his first taste of Algebra. “Boy,” she’d question him, “if you multiply 6 times a number and get 42, what is that number you multiplied by 6?” And when he answered she’d ask him about the numbers they began with, the 42 and the 6. How were they helpful?

Her confidence would soar. No, her boy couldn’t miss. He was a natural in this subject so innate to human thinking.

She’d move on boldly. “And if you divide 30 by a number and get 6 for an answer, what number did you divide by?” Then a suggestive pause and the question most meaningful to him: “Now do you understand why your times tables are so important?”

No, no, no. Seventh Grade was way too late for her Alexander, an injustice for any child, to begin pre-Algebra. She’d have him fluent in his X’s and Y’s long before Fifth ended. And both would have a jolly time doing so.

If only she could reach the others.

This thought, her greatest wish and regret, dogged her daily teaching. Her frustration and disappointment with herself shadowed every lesson she would give. But tutoring Alex had brought her relief from her self-doubt, her own confidence measured by his. And if she was successful with tutoring him, there had to be a way to include all- and she meant every last one- of the other students. Someday- and it had to be soon- someday, she would lift that mountain on her strapping black shoulders. She’d break that wall and push them past it. Just stay grateful. Give yourself a little credit. And don’t be afraid to love. That’s how you keep your faith, Sister. That’s how you’re gonna lift that mountain. You can’t push anything if you’re asleep on the rocking chair.

That last day of classes and after-school tutoring, tests and homework, songs and Flutophone misadventures came at last, and with it both the sweet joy of freedom and the melancholy sadness of departure. He had done well, and for once gave himself credit for being a good learner. The effort he had put in had not been wasted.

Alex had never considered himself bright. Despite his comic book scholarship, he knew his thinking was lacking. Up to now he had not been able to break the code that prevented him from understanding Arithmetic. It was an undeniable mental block he had lugged like an oppressive clamp throttling his mind, and with its stifling came the dispiriting awareness that his intelligence was flawed and inadequate. This self-criticism withered his confidence, flouted his self-respect, impaired

his critical judgment. He'd always had faith he would eventually master his language skills, and that faith had bolstered him. But his confidence had been incomplete.

Finally, after 3 months of tutoring, he had not only solved the mystery of arithmetic's four basic functions but was forging ahead of the pack struggling with its challenges. And there was no need to impress Mrs. Philpot by being the first to raise his hand when she questioned the class. He would wait until the others had had their chance, commenting in cautious phrases only if they could not provide an answer. He realized that arithmetic was as nerve wracking to them as it had been for him, remembered a time when he had swallowed the gum he chewed, so little did he know. But her compassion and patient clarity had unknotted his fearful repression and released the suppressed gateway of joyful appreciation. He was learning and having fun doing so. The fountain would never run dry. The water would always be cool and fresh. What finer boon could anyone receive?

There was no reason the other students could not shake off a little misunderstanding if they had a simple key. Afterall, when he needed it, he got it- and maybe it was his turn to pass it along. So, when Mrs. Philpot organized group work, he took his role seriously. While he had never considered himself a leader, he felt emboldened to help them- and especially her. His back straightened from the slouch he had affected to make himself less noticeable. Though his accent would retain hints of foreignness even into his teens, the stuttering was over.

As his days of healing through helping passed, the children in his group came to rely on him, deferring to his seemingly natural understanding, appreciating his sharing it freely and modestly. He made friends, perhaps not like Marvin yet- that kind of closeness took time to develop- but serious children were attracted to him. And as for those less thoughtful, the flippant, the juvenile, the spoiled and self-indulgent, there was but so much anyone could do to help them until they were ready to accept help, until they were anxious to listen and truly hear. He would try his best to be patient.

All functioning people had the human potential to understand. If they just cared enough to sincerely try, their minds would inevitably open. But how was one to inspire their willingness? How to rouse their dormant earnestness? He had sensed Mrs. Philpot's frustration over them. With abundant patience and her good heart, she had persevered despite his own initial, impish resistance. Perhaps in time they would value the treasures she offered them. Until that better day, he would follow her lead, be grateful for all his new friendships and blessings, especially to her, the wise and wonderful teacher who had gifted him much more than fluency with basic mathematical principles.

So, on that last day of school, when he was tapped on the shoulder by a ghost from his past and informed that Wayne was waiting for him outside, sudden, unanticipated dread shook him from the reprieve the past few months of armistice had deceived him to gullibly expect.

Outside, Oldhall Street still looked familiar; the school of dusty red brick and massive paneled windows, the fine old maples, their leaves that fluttered like butterfly wings, even the cracks of the sidewalk, were the same as they had been for those past three months. But his belly was back at Hill, pumping caustic alarm up into his throat, reviving the nightmares that had choked his composure and fueled the anxiety that had never fully expired. A few words whispered close to his ear, and a simple dream of peace, that the brutish hostility of his Hill past would not repeat itself here at Hall, snapped like a dried-out rubber band.

It didn't matter that he hadn't provoked Wayne or anyone else, and except for his weak English and mathematical knack, had not stood out. He knew that he had become a target again.

Every Hill memory flooding him with panic confirmed that there was no escaping his past, that this perverse, insistent Deja vu is how the walk home always begins.

He had heard about this Wayne. His sister, Agnes, was in Alex's class. The rude comments she directed at Mrs. Philpot and her intimidation of smaller children had convinced him to stay out of her reach. So, he had avoided her, had never spoken with her. He imagined Wayne to be a larger, more belligerent, more offensive version of his aggressive, bullying sister.

Nor had the two boys ever met. They had never exchanged words or even a glance. Nor were they in the same grade. What Alex did know of him came from comments he had overheard from other students, oftentimes Wayne's victims, who spoke of him only to trusted friends, and then only in hush-hush murmurs from fear of being overheard and exposed to suffer certain retribution. Alex did know that Wayne had stayed back a year and barely scraped himself out of 6th grade, probably with an exculpatory shove and a groan of relief from Mr. Connor and his teachers who regarded him tall enough for junior high. What did the school tyrant want from him?

Another voice confirmed the situation. Wayne was outside waiting for him on Oldhall Street with a group of his hangers-on, blocking the way home, describing in detailed humor the licking he was about to deliver to a deserving upstart commie. It was a pleasure to announce that the impending slaughter would make an entertaining grand premier to kick off yet another restful and congenial summer vacation. And if Wayne's pals were lucky, it would be followed by more of the same as the season progressed and boredom settled in.

So just like that, in the time it takes for lightning to flash and thunder to boom, the same old ghost had returned to haunt him. What a fool he had been to think he had escaped its frigid, clammy grip.

Gregori had tried to warn him. "Don't ever expect anything," he had heard his father sermonize so many times at the dinner table, "Don't ever expect anything and you can't be disappointed."

This rejected advice had sounded too cynical to be true. Believing that the best things were yet to come had kept him going. How could he give up even the trifling shred of optimism that had sustained him? And his father's assertion suggested other repellant ancillary nihilisms: To dream is to have nightmares; Faith is the last gasp of the weak and ignorant; Trust breeds betrayal; Only those with hearts can be heart-broken.

But those few words whispered in his ear had affirmed the way of all things. He had been foolish and disrespectful not to heed the lessons his father had tried to pass on to him.

After all, Gregori was a survivor. The numbers Alex saw every day tattooed to the web between his thumb and forefinger when his father raised a spoonful of kasha to his lips attested to that. And those lips he kissed when he bid his parents goodnight and retired to his warm, secure bed! The upper still bore the dark purple scar of shrapnel suffered during the War. And what about all the other wretchedness and indignities the old man undoubtedly kept to himself? The hunger and homelessness? His lack of proper schooling that had doomed him to a life of servitude unbecoming of his talent and intelligence? The theft of his childhood? The constant anxiety of being separated from Babushka and Dyedushka? Of being sent to the front at age 12?

His naive, untested son had been unfair and uncaring. Gregori had earned the right to his convictions through his own pain and suffering. In questioning the man's values the boy had shown

no respect or gratitude, no love that was a father's due- as if the hardship he had endured in his brief life qualified him to judge Gregori's bona fides.

His father had done his part. He had tried to pass hard-gained wisdom onto his child, to disabuse him of pretense and spare him pain. And Alex had displayed his contempt and gullibility by believing the pattern set at Hill had ended, that his life would change, that the best was yet to come. He should have known the sandcastles he had built would dissolve before the unyielding tide, that the freedom he enjoyed of making choices dangled bright shiny hope but was fueled with unfulfilled dreams. That familiar Hill sickness curdling his stomach, the same fear and distress gnawing at his spirit, proclaimed the cosmic design immutable and unavoidable, his Hall opportunities feckless and irrelevant.

Gregori had to be right; his stomach told him so. The struggle was pointless, vain and inescapably cyclical. It had always been that way; it had dogged him from Hill to Hall. And yet what could he have done but scrap ahead and persevere? Like his father had, whose troubles had been so much greater than his own. Whose talents were wasted, and opportunities uprooted.

But how did the old man go on without hopefulness? Was it the bitterness that drove him?

There were men, and there were absurd dreamers of the impossible. There were men, and there were the egoists who found consolation in self-deception. There were men, and there were the vainglorious, who crowned themselves with a pretense of nobility and the image of godliness. There were men, and there were the self-absorbed whiners, comic in their sham pathos. There were men, and there were the desperate untouchables, who clung to convenient, compromised, painted lady hope and found comfort in the placebo relief of their inept lovemaking. There were the sleepwalking victims, and there were men to whom the circle's daily slog owed nothing. There were those who clutched what dignity they could believe in, and there were men who spun round and round on fortune's squeaky axis, shields raised as the wrecking ball struck.

It would be many years before Alex could articulate these impressions into thoughts he could analyze, many more until he could resolve them to his satisfaction. Now, on that lonely, crowded street, the 9-year-old could intuit them only through the upset of his belly and the quivering of his throat. It was as if he had blundered through the portal of the Fifth Dimension where the dictates of logic and science do not apply. Nothing was recognizable or familiar. Arithmetic offered no four-function solution to his hopelessness, and Mrs. Philpot's Puzzler, clever as he was, had no advice to counter his father's. Superman, who could leap over a skyscraper, couldn't tear himself off a comic strip to rescue him. Even Marvin's cavalry couldn't save him this time. He tried to remember their friendship on Laurel, to rekindle the faith the older boy had instilled, the confidence that had escaped him, but a different image of the street came to mind.

A turtle large and clumsy as a cast iron skillet had been crawling along Laurel Street. She was following the instincts that had kept her species enduring for a quarter of a billion years. Her ancestors had survived dinosaurs and the comet that killed them off, ice ages and climate disasters, floods, volcanic eruptions and soup pots, three planet-rendering mass extinctions that eradicated more than half of the species that had lived alongside her kind. She was still plodding along the paths that only a trivial few of her historic contemporaries could ever journey again.

She had come wild from the river that bordered one length of the city, from the marshlands where Laurel starts its urban run, a 2-mile crawl on stubby ungainly legs over trafficked asphalt and concrete. Inch by inch, sorely, slowly, steadily, she had followed the instincts that mapped her fixed course and drove her on. Somewhere ahead in the city there was a responsibility she was obligated

to fulfill. On and on she slithered, each small step bringing her that much farther from the safety of her home, until at last, single-minded and determined, she had reached her unlikely destination, the city where Laurel Street terminated.

She was an old turtle, mother to many generations of hatchlings. There had never been decisions for her to make, nor tactics to plan. An inborn navigator pointed the way and inevitability drove her on. The eggs she was carrying needed a hatching place. The street she inched upon was paved but she was following claw scrapes millions of years old. The species needed to survive, and it would take more than the brainpower of a turtle to preserve it. Her instincts had never misguided her. And so, as turtles do, she kept calm and pushed on.

The boy had been walking home from school. He saw her posed on her back, motionless, as if she had rebounded by sudden impact into the street gutter. Her death stench, moist and sickening, like the reek of unwashed animals caged in an unkempt zoo, steeped the cloying air. Bloody pulp and collapsed entrails oozed from one side of her crushed carapace. Ten front claws like talons on webbed stumps extended toward the sky in a grotesque conflation of fixated resistance and prayerful release. Neither the stare of her blank, vacant eyes nor her expressionless face revealed any record of how she had spent her final, ghastly, agonizing moments. But the flies were satisfied. They buzzed rapturously around her. They gathered on the soft, splashed places, rubbed their forelegs together, feasted greedily, filled their ravenous guts with the castoffs of her final testament.

It was all so futile. The poor stupid magnificent turtle. She had made her best effort and what good had it done? All those tiny steps on short stubby legs. A hopeless goal driven by faulty instinct had left her lying dead and violated. What had she accomplished?

And as for the boy, his dreams were his own worst enemy. They had lent him vain hope.

Alex left the building alone. He did not look for Zoya and he avoided his friends. He did not want them to witness him this way- faithless, hopeless, and beaten. The new, improved Alex lost and rudderless.

He didn't need to walk far before he saw the mob awaiting him. He'd seen it before at Hill. It hadn't changed. Still thrilled by the expectation of seeing someone hurt and humiliated. Still idiotic and brutish, like the fans of Friday night wrestling demanding blood and sham retribution. Except this was no television show, no game. It was nauseatingly real. The punches would hurt, and real blood would drip from split lips.

They would single him out for public shame and disgrace. They would mock his private dreams and hope. Later, when their entertainment was over, he'd rage at the unfairness and blame himself for not being the Boy Wonder who could teach them that he would not be disrespected, that it was in their best interest to leave him alone and unmolested. Then finally, when he would return to his family bruised, bloody and humiliated, his shirt tattered and pants ripped in private places, he'd have to endure the sarcastic condescension of Lydia, make explanations to Gregori, who would add a slap or whipping for his foolish involvement with people of that caliber and, of course, the wasteful expense of torn clothes. His father, seconded by his mother, would make it clear that the house the trouble-provoking boy inhabited was neither Fortress of Solitude for his brooding nor embracing home when he cried out for comfort.

A hootenanny howl rose up in the distance. The crowd had spotted him slowly making his way in their direction. It was pleased and eager. A good time guaranteed for all. Just the thing to kick off another lazy summer vacation. Besides- what could Mr. Connor do now that school had ended?

Alex walked on. There was nowhere else to go, nothing else he could do but walk and try to make sense of his pointless, useless, painful inklings.

So let's just get this over and done with. Now. I don't want to have to think about you and your rotten ways, your bullying and stupidity any longer than I need to. You want to fight? Let's get it over with. I'd rather take a beating than be sick thinking about you.

A cacophony of hoots and catcalls filled his ears as he neared Wayne and his admirers:

"Here he come! Here he come!" they chanted.

"I be runnin' if I was him!"

"You be cryin' like a baby!"

"You goin' down, boy!"

"Best call yo' mama!"

"Commie spy!"

Slowly, reluctantly, he approached them. Then the pack seemed to part like Moses' Red Sea and Wayne stepped into the middle of the sidewalk and blocked his way. His shadow shrouded the boy. His frame blocked the sun. Three years older, he towered above Alex, glorying in his role of tormentor, glibly flaunting his bold aggression for everyone weaker to admire and fear.

"'Bout time yuh got heeah, son! Ah don' like tuh be kep' waitin'."

Alex said nothing. Let him wait some more. He was in no rush.

"Yuh so stupit, yuh don' know when tuh run!" Wayne added, tapping his chest with a provocative finger.

Alex remembered all those times when he did run. And hated himself afterwards for it.

"Yo' mama so ugly de doctor slapted huhr when yuh wuz bornt."

What was that accusatory word again, the one Mrs. Murphy had used to describe him that awful day when she had dragged him out of class? It came to him in a flash: "truck-you-lent." Is this what it meant?

The expectant crowd howled uproariously at the invocation of that treasured chestnut. Alex maintained his severe silence. He had heard it all before. Besides, Lydia was certainly not ugly.

"Too asceared tuh talk, Russky spayh?"

Yes, he was scared. No escaping that fact either. The best he could do was not show it. But how stupid can one be to imagine a 9-year-old spy? He'd been called that before by others with whom it was useless to reason. Idiots like that only understood one thing, the difference between physical strength and weakness.

"Wuzzamattah? Cat gotcha commie tongue?"

He'd been called that ugly word- "commie"- many times before. Back home, just as the Rosenthals had whispered horrors of the Holocaust, his own parents, when they thought Alex and Zoya were asleep, had spoken of the grandfather after whom he was named, that other Alexander, Lydia's father, the one who had perished in the gulag by the hand of the Reds for allegedly observing

Mass through the choral singing of liturgical music. He could only sense the irony he was still too young to define. But he was quite familiar with the stupidity of the stupid who made these stupid insults. Stupid people entertaining other stupid people with their stupid choice of popular stupidities. What was the point of explaining to them that Jews were not Nazis, that he was no "commie"?

Why respond at all? At home, he had been obligated to concoct futile explanations to the criticisms and accusations Gregori would make over his many faults. Here on the street, he didn't owe anyone any response at all, not that it would have made any difference. No talk of peace, no explanation, was going to change anything. Gregori would have his opportunity with him at home and Wayne wasn't going to back off in front of all his friends.

"You bes' be too esceared tuh tahk. 'Cause Ah'm gonna knock yo' teeth in 'til yo' stinkin' soghs roll down yo' laig! Ah'm gonna beat yo' haid wit yo' own holey, stinkin' shoe! Ah'm gonna teah up yo' raggedy-ass pands an' make yuh crawl home in yo' unnerwears!" He paused the oratory to deliver a meaningful leer and added, "An' den yo' sista's!"

The rowdy crowd expressed its appreciation for these threats with a raucous, enthusiastic roar. Not one of the celebrants felt obliged to mention that in his own grubby poverty and neglect, Wayne's clothes fit him like a body bag.

Alex's poorly postured slouch straightened as he heard those portending, menacing words. His mother was old enough to take care of herself, and she knew how to do it. He'd seen her handle Gregori very effectively. No need to respond to any yo-mama insults. But the mention of his sister was something totally new and unexpected. He gulped air into swelling lungs; his fists balled up. Zoya's involvement in this present mickle demanded clarification.

He looked up from the ground, still unbelieving she was embroiled in this mess, and soundlessly, mirthlessly stared at the other boy's grinning face. But something was different this time. Not the crowd. Not his opponent. Perhaps it was from the air straining his lungs. Perhaps it was in the charging blood. He was not sure what was happening, but he knew something significant within him was changing, as if he were releasing someone who had been residing within himself, someone he had never met before.

Time trickled second by second like the obstinate leaking of a sinking ship. Drop by drop it dribbled until Alex understood the implicit impact of Wayne's words. Then his eyes took on the menacing shade of a battlecruiser. His lips tightened. He broke his silence.

"My sister? What about her?" was all there was to say. The change he was feeling within himself did not express itself in oratory nor diplomacy. It was more in the nature of the attitude that pushes the final, fatal, unretractable red button.

A tense stillness settled over the crowd. Like primordial predators squaring off over territory, one confident and dominant, the other calculating and hungry, the two boys began to measure each other's potential mettle.

Wayne's grin ended the mute faceoff. He stretched his scars wide enough for even those in the back of the crowd to admire. His taunting eyes gleamed. "Tell me yuh didn' know she wuz trash-talkin' Aggie. Tell me now," he chortled loudly enough for everyone to enjoy this useless posturing as much as he did. And then with sudden gravity he added, "While yuh still ken."

Wayne waited for the response he didn't get. Alex's noncompliance annoyed him. The quiet boy should have been begging for his mercy by now, not that he'd grant any. His composure rattled, he filled the void of silence that frustrated him.

"See, we don' lahk dat. Her and yuh needs tuh aplogize. But Ah'm still gonna whup yuh up uh lesson anyways."

By now, Alex's lungs were pumping marathon air. They had never been so full, had never driven his blood so madly. Something strange and new within him was rising up and taking command, replacing the passive boy he had been. The veins on his small fists swelled and his pallid skin reddened. He could feel his blood steaming, surging like an angry sea whose antiseptic waves would sweep the littered shore clean. His muscles seemed stronger than ever. He felt them forged by mallet and anvil, steeling his arms, his legs, his fists, his stomach.

And where was the fear he had always carried? Yes, he was surely becoming angry, enraged as he had seen Gregori be so many times, but what had happened to the fear that had dominated him just a moment ago?

And where was that stranger he had been so intimate with, the timid child pitying his inescapable fate? Who was this new monstrosity he felt himself becoming, the one who had displaced that helpless whining child, the one sprouting horns and a tail? And as for this fevered demon, his unexpected present identity- could it be the man he was meant to become?

Adult survival hormones, his first testosterone experience, fueled his rage, galvanized his belly with frenzied courage that heeded no consequence.

He had read about this kind of sudden metamorphosis in his comic books but never believed that it could happen to him. Clark Kent removed his eyeglasses and became Superman; Alex heard a magic phrase and shazammed his fear and self-doubt. But that here-to-fore repressed character Wayne's threats had provoked didn't require a cape. Alex was not becoming Captain Marvel or the Caped Crusader he sympathized with. This present persona had appeared courtesy of Mrs. Philpot's bookshelf library. And there was nothing noble about the superman emerging from Alex's uncharted psyche, this unreasoning homicidal maniac who preyed upon toothless victims to satisfy the savagery of his gruesome, loathsome instincts. Dr. Jekyll certainly knew his times tables. Mr. Hyde had a different priority. And he was fully content with his persona and his lust.

"An' latah afta Ah'm done whichya, Aggie ken finich da job on yo' sista."

Alex felt his fury spewing inexhaustible outrage, vivid and satisfying as a first orgasm.

Wayne advanced. He had waited too long, had not succeeded in humiliating or frightening the smaller boy as he had expected. His face tensed with taut muscles; his eyes flashed with faux hilarity. He looked down at Alex with scripted glee. This would be fine sport. He would teach him yet. The entitled crowd was sure to be pleased with their hero. Rack up another score for the big boy. He had his reputation to preserve, his friends to amuse. But there was something different about this boy, something that ruffled his self-assurance.

If Alex hadn't been in the final flush of his monomaniacal transformation, he might have noticed an unexpected nuance in Wayne's demeanor, an almost hidden trace of what he might have interpreted as doubt. But it was too late for any finely shaded discernment. Two raptors don't pause to philosophize when they face off.

As Wayne drew closer, each step seemed to grow his body larger. It blocked out the blue of the sky, the smothering crowd, every thought of peace. His bulk cast a shadow that eclipsed the boy, that made him appear smaller and more isolated in the swelling, hostile arena enfolding him.

What the crowd could not have known was the wildness of the blood rushing through Alex's veins. Like a frenzied waterfall after a torrent, it supercharged him with oxygen, fueled him like the high-octane abandon of cocaine. He had experienced a dilute inkling of this before at Hill, but hardly with the kind of crazed ferocity he was feeling now.

For the first time, he lost the self-discipline that had routinely controlled his anger. His whirling fury was as autonomous as the beating of the heart. Adult chemistry had taken command of his will. Adrenaline-boosted aggression neutralized his fear, and he felt a new craving, the child werewolf's awful hunger to taste blood for the first time, to feel it sizzling and sticky on newly sprouted claws and fangs, to know the creature's gratification as it heard the snapping of its victim's bones, saw his blood spurting like a fountain from the tender, vulnerable places it had hacked with machete finesse.

Just a few minutes before he would have been nauseated by this newly uncovered self. Now, as Evolution reversed its enlightening course, he exalted in the lurid lengthening of his tail bone. This was no tame, well-mannered boy-child Clark Kent becoming the equally polite Superboy who subdued his foes instead of grinding them along the pavement like so much sidewalk parmesan, punned without bitterness or sarcasm, kept his emotions under control rather than lashing out into vicious, thrashing aggression. No. Recidivist survivalism had been revived. The kindly Dr. Jekyll had succumbed to the voracious, dyscalculic Mr. Hyde and the unquenchable lust that goaded him to slash his victim into gory, palpitating, bite-sized chunks and devour them scalding and raw, piece by piece, before his helpless, gasping victim and his horrified cohorts. Now he could not imagine himself as anyone other than this surreal lip-smacking cutthroat he had so swiftly and surprisingly become. Had there been a moon in that afternoon sky, he would have raised his glowing red eyes to it and howled maniacally.

No. Better to leave Attila to his chess and Torquemada to his equations. Save the bubbling, boiling blood and lacerated flesh to appease Alex's awful passion, to satisfy his self-righteous sense of justice.

The slender boy's balled fists were solid bone. His shirt, damp and much too tight. He felt bigger, taller than he'd been just moments before. But he also knew he'd be punching the armor of a battle tank when the fighting started. Brass knuckled fists wouldn't be worth more than a pinging rebound when Wayne swung his arm back. But that primitive part of Alex's brain had been awakened, that feral part that drives a lesser raptor's cunning.

By the clock, to the gathered fans, everything happened so quickly. But to Alex's altered perception, time took on the leisurely pace of a slide projector. Like a painting in Cubism, the boy saw the arc of Wayne's arm fanning in progressive segments toward his head. The kaleidoscope images seemed to move so slowly, like a movie shown frame by frame. As Wayne's fist shot forward, he had all the time he needed to step back and deliver his most potent weapon, his scorpion's tail, a punter's kick to Wayne's unprotected groin just below the line of his zipper. As it struck, he felt its cushioned impact, a determined cloven hoof ramming tender yielding flesh. He heard Wayne's yelp and then his groan. Like panels in a comic book, he saw the indestructible battle tank collapse onto itself, fold and fall.

And then, suddenly it seemed to him, the slow-motion progression was over. Clock time was restored, the coach became a pumpkin, and he was sober Alex once again. He saw the local favorite doubled-up on the ground, wheezing and whimpering, too injured to raise himself up, his teary face contorted in pain and stupefied disbelief.

"You leave my sister alone," was all that was left to say as he backed up and walked away. The dumbfounded crowd silently stepped aside, and besides the panting gasps coming from Wayne, he could hear one lone voice from its midst:

"That's not fair! He didn't fight fair!"

Alex, neat and crisp in clothing and steady in deportment, presented his final report card to Gregori that evening. The pattern set by his studies of math had repeated itself in all his subjects. Steady, long-term progress in English meant improvement in Science, Social Studies and History. Every subject was becoming more understandable. Learning had become easier, more enjoyable and very satisfying. Hall was having a beneficial effect on him. And Mrs. Philpot had promised to tutor him again next year.

Gregori studied the boy's grades. There was an "A" from Miss Messina for his enthusiastic singing and precise, articulate tooting. (She was so convinced that Flutophone practice had cured Alex's stuttering that she had made this experience the subject of her Master's thesis.) "B+'s" in Social Studies and Science. Another full "A" in English, ironically enough, the grade based on the progress he had achieved in three months: his perfect spelling, the quantity of books he had borrowed- and read- from the bookshelf library, his penmanship and writing, his improved fluency. The boy hardly ever stuttered anymore.

Gregori criticized the boy's "B+'s" but not overly harshly. Even he understood that Alex's English was not at grade level yet despite the "A" (the teacher probably felt sorry for him, his father surmised) and that success in those subjects relies on language skills. Gregori was struggling with the language himself- and as for Lydia's progress, well, he hadn't married her for her brains. But when he came to the "A-" in Arithmetic, Gregori grew stern and questioned the minus. Arithmetic was about numbers, not words. Weak language skill was no excuse. And hadn't he tried to impress upon the boy the importance of the subject?

No. The boy never did anything perfectly, not even simple sums.

The boy gazed into his father's eyes and wondered what was behind them. Grateful that there would be no whipping or cheap shot to endure this time, thankful that the hurtful words were fewer in number than usual, Alex had not expected praise nor encouragement. As Gregori often reminded him, that like everybody else, he had a job to do, and there was nothing especially praiseworthy about fulfilling one's obligations. Duty fulfilled requires no recognition or extraneous thankfulness. One did what one had to do, and that was all the gratification one needed and should expect.

The boy heeded his father's words and then without a word of regret or explanation, he turned around and left the house. In the garage he found the worn leather football Dyedushka had gifted him the previous weekend. It was somewhat flat, so he used his bicycle pump to inflate it until it held all the air it could short of bursting. He put the ball under his arm and crossed the street to the deserted baseball field. Then, until the sun told him that borsht and kasha would soon be served, he kicked that ball over and over, back and forth from one end of the field to the other.

Gene Burshuliak

Winter, ‘23/’24