

ABOUT US



CHESTER AARON



About
us

FROM CHESTER AARON

Garlic Kisses (and Tasty Hugs)

Whispers

Murder by Metaphor

JUVENILE FICTION

Willa's Poppy

Gideon

An American Ghost



A Novel by

Chester Aaron

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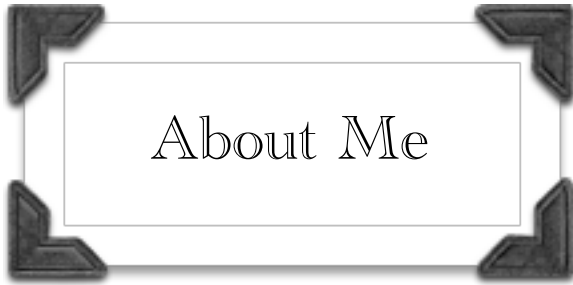
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*For Margaurite and Louis—
Again*



Winter 1932

Rachel calls, “Benny! Get up!” and I sit up in bed. The cold air bites my body, and I burrow under the blankets again, searching for that warm hollow in which I’ve lain all night.

The blanket before my face has formed itself into a tunnel. I peer through the tunnel at the square of distant light, the frosted window. It was snowing when I came home from school yesterday; it was snowing when I went to bed. It was still snowing when I fell asleep. Now I watch the shadows of the snowflakes swirling across the white window.

I have to go to the toilet, but the thought of fighting my way through the snow and lowering myself onto the icy wooden seat is terrifying. I’ll force myself to wait until I get to school, where the floors of the toilets are clean white tile and the bowls are polished enamel and the seats are always warm.

After collapsing the tunnel, I picture to myself where, on the floor, my shoes will be, where my underwear and my pants and my shirt will be. I memorize my movements so that I’ll have to spend the absolute mini-

mum of time in my room and then the hall and then the stairway.

“Benny!”

I pull the warm darkness tighter and tighter about me.

“Benny, I’m going down now. You *have* to get up.”

I’m up.

I try to remember if Rachel has been in to kiss me. She must have been in. She never forgets. Well, just a minute more. When I hear her going down the stairs I’ll get up.

At the end of the hall, opposite the door to Rachel’s room, a flight of stairs drops steeply onto a landing where another door leads into the kitchen. That door is open now in a futile effort to entice warm air upstairs. On such cold mornings as this one, the air, by the time it reaches the upstairs and circulates among all the cold rooms, arrives in my room as bitter as the outside wind that claws and screams now at the house.

Suddenly I realize that today is Friday, the last day of school before Christmas vacation. Today, in Assembly, Miss Curry will announce the winner of the poster contest. I leap out of bed.

Naked, I rush about the room. The cold floor stings the soles of my feet but I continue gathering clothes until my arms contain everything except my underwear. Beginning to shiver now, I drop to my hands and knees. My underwear is not under the bed. As I start to check the closet, to see if Max has played one of his tricks, I recall that Momma told me last night she would have a clean suit of long underwear for me this morning.

I dash down the hallway, my bare feet slapping the wood floor. I leap down the steps, my clothes held high so none of the dangling sleeves or strings can trip me. A shoe falls. I cry out in pain and frustration, but I turn

and scramble back up the stairs, hesitating only long enough to grab the shoe. I run down the stairs again.

One final leap carries me from the landing into the warm kitchen. I drop all my clothes to the floor and hold out my arms to the coal stove. For several seconds, I remain in that position, all but embracing the stove. Then, slowly, I turn to let some of the warmth be smeared across my back.

Rachel sits at the kitchen table, eating her toast and coffee. She's reading the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

"It's supposed to go below zero tonight," she says. "Gee, I hope Reuben doesn't have trouble with the buses."

"A good night for hot soup," Momma says. She is at the gas stove, stirring a pot of oatmeal. She wears a heavy sweater over her dress and a pair of Jacob's wool socks over her cotton hose. She is beautiful, despite her rag-picker appearance. In profile she reminds me of the head of the Indian on the nickel. I've often tried to convince the kids at school that my mother really is an Indian. After all, if she is, so am I.

I hear Momma describing the food she's making for dinner tonight to celebrate Reuben's being home. The heat of the stove drains my energy, and I stand there, idle, smiling at the way things have turned out. Tonight's dinner will be special for two reasons. Not just because Reuben will be home from college but because I'll win the prize. Everyone will be proud of me. Rachel will sit beside me, hugging me. Poppa will grin, his face beaming, and he'll brag about how this will show *them*. Momma will hover over me, offering extra cake. Jacob will punch me, in play, and will tell me he's always known I'm a better artist than I am a boxer. Reuben...well, Reuben's been praising me, no matter what I do, ever since I was born. Even Max will have to find something special to say.

I revolve very slowly to prolong the warm, drowsy fantasies. My belly is bright red from the heat.

Although I'm only eight years old my eyes are on a level with Momma's. She seems taller because she carries herself so erect and moves with such assurance and dignity that I often feel no matter how old I might be, or how tall, she'll always seem taller.

Rachel walks the same way. Like everyone else in the family, she has brown, almost black, eyes. And black hair. Once this winter, two or three weeks ago, after both Rachel and Momma washed their hair, they sat in front of the coal-stove. Poppa had stoked the fire for them. The walls of the stove were cherry-red.

I was doing my homework at the kitchen table. Looking up, I watched as they took turns combing each other's long black hair. On the page in the book before me was a picture of a siren on an ocean rock. I sat very still. Poppa, sitting across from me, was stirring strawberry preserves into his tea. He stopped stirring, and he watched, too

Jacob has taught Max how to play chess. They never talk when they play. For once, they stopped concentrating on the board. They stared at Rachel and Momma—each a reflection of the other; each, though small and delicate, strong, not at all fragile. On the radio, on station KDKA, Marian Anderson was singing "Ave Maria." In spite of herself, Momma, unaware that we were all staring, smiled with pleasure as she listened to a Negro sing the salutation of Gabriel to the Virgin Mary.

Rachel began to braid her hair. It was Poppa who first realized that he was smiling. He dropped his spoon. The spell was broken. I went back to my book, and Max and Jacob went back to their chess game.

I leap out of my reverie as Momma shouts, "Benjamin! Hurry! Your underwear! You want the bus should go

without you?" She interrupts her stirring of the oatmeal to point at the chair near the stove.

To warm the underwear, I take it from the chair and hold it close to the stove door, which is open.

It is long underwear. I step into the legs, then the arms. For an hour or so the underwear will be tight about my calves and thighs but then, around noon, the cloth will begin to sag. From now until I change underwear again, in three or four days, several minutes every morning will be devoted to the careful folding of the cuffs each time I put on my socks.

I button the front, feel behind for the drop-seat, find it and close it. While I tuck my heavy plaid shirt in my trousers I say, trying to sound casual, "The winner's announced today."

"Winner of what?" Momma asks. "Will you hurry, Benjamin? In fifteen minutes the bus leaves, and you ain't washed yet."

"The poster contest?" Rachel asks.

"Yeah." I feel the blood rush to my head at the thought of the crowded auditorium and Miss Curry on the stage and the kids turning to admire me.

"Benjamin, Max is already left. All the other kids, they're on the bus already."

"Miss Curry says I'll be a great artist someday. She says she'll be able to say she knew me when."

"Better you should be a great eater first," Momma says. "Last few days what you eat wouldn't keep a bedbug alive. Hurry up. Wash. Eat. Mr. Griswold's in the bus, growling like Yenta. I can hear him. You want one or two toast? You'll have two."

"Just oatmeal. I want to hurry."

"Take time. Eat. It won't take long, some toast, a cup cocoa." She drops two slices of bread on the gas burners.

I go to the sink, stand on the stool reserved for me, turn on the faucet, hold my breath and push my hands under the icy water. Tonight, to keep the water in the pipes from freezing, Poppa will let it run all night. Off and on, until morning, he will get out of bed and place hot towels around whatever length of pipe is accessible.

I pull my hands out of the water, rub my cheeks and reach for a towel.

“Soap,” Momma says.

“It’s cold.”

“The cocoa’s hot. The oatmeal’s hot. Hurry up.”

I roll the brown soap in my hands, push and pull my hands through the water, rub my face, rinse it once, quickly, and then grab the towel. I dry my hands and face, rubbing them briskly, and I bend forward to receive the heat from the fire directly on my cheeks. Warm now, and hungry, but anxious to be at school, I sit at the table and begin wolfing my cereal.

“You have to eat like Yenta?” Momma asks. “She’s a dog, she eats like a dog. You’re a *mensh*.”

“Momma, if I win I get ten dollars and a medal. And my picture in *The Summer Eagle*. Everyone, Miss Curry and everyone, says my poster’s the best.”

“Is *everyone* judges?” Momma asks. “You’ll take my advice, the eggs, they’re hatched, then count your chickens.”

“I saw Mary Schneider’s painting,” Rachel says. “It’s very good.” She hurries to add, “Not as good as yours, but good.” She takes my hand between her own. Her hands feel as if they’re sheathed in velvet. “But Momma’s right. Don’t be disappointed if you don’t win. There must be a hundred students in the contest. From all over Summer County. Ninety-five are going to be losers.”

“Reuben won a scholarship. And he won a gold medal at college.”

“We aren’t all Reubens,” Rachel says. “And some contests he enters he’ll lose. He has to.”

I find that hard to believe.

Momma, who’s nodded and smiled at her daughter’s support, wipes butter from my cheek. She removes a tortoise-shell comb from her own hair to try to fix some order to my curls.

“Hair like his,” she says, “black sheep’s wool.” She rarely refers to Poppa as *Chatzkel* or *your father* and she never calls him *Al*, as everyone else in Sundown does. It’s almost always *him* or *his*.

I continue eating, knowing it’s useless to try to communicate my optimism. Poppa and Momma, both from the Old Country, are always skeptical of anyone getting anything for nothing. And drawing, or painting, is nothing. Rachel cannot afford the luxury of hope. Her anguish, should I not win, will be great enough without having added to it the burden of a long day’s anticipation.

But wait!

Wait until I come home and put the ten-dollar bill in Momma’s hand. Wait until I open the black box and display the gold medal. (Will it be in a black box?) Momma’s eyes will fill with tears. She’ll kiss my cheeks. When she climbs the stairs to her bedroom she’ll take the medal with her, and she’ll store it deep in her trunk. Every year she’ll remove it, to polish it, and she’ll hold it up to the light and will remind me how proud *my* children will be and how grateful *I’ll* be for her having kept it. I will not protest when she presses my head against her bosom.

And tonight, when Reuben teases me about my prize, and pretends to scoff at it, it will be evident to everyone that he will be even prouder than Momma.

The door leading from the kitchen to the store opens, and Poppa comes in, the black curls on his head

indeed like sheep's wool. His black mustachios completely hide both lips.

"Hi, Poppa."

"Griswold's yelling you're late, you're keeping the bus."

"I'm coming."

"You're coming. You're coming an hour now. Tomorrow I'll wake you myself."

I laugh. "No school tomorrow. No school for two weeks." I dance around him, chanting, "No school tomorrow."

He makes a grab for me, and I dart away. While Rachel laughs and Momma shouts for him to let me eat, Poppa roars. Two white teeth peek out from under the black mustachios. He catches me, locks my head in one arm and rubs my curls with a gnarled brown fist.

He lets me break loose. I stumble around the kitchen, drinking my cocoa and biting and chewing toast and fighting my way into galoshes and mackinaw, Momma following me with her comb, trying to repair the damage Poppa's fist has done to the part she just a few minutes earlier had forced into my hair. No sooner does she succeed than I pull on my red tassel cap. She throws up her hands in despair.

Rachel has strapped my books together and is holding them out at arms' length. I spear them on my way to the door.

"Your lunch...your lunch."

I return, tuck the paper bag under my arm like a football and run again. Out of the kitchen. Through the dark, narrow passage between the wall and the counter. The showcase door is open, and I smell the crisp crusted breads and the five-cent peach and apricot pies. Past the red-bellied coal stove (around which four old men sit, patiently waiting for the peace that will routinely settle

once the bus departs). Past the candy cases. Past the meat freezer. Past the shelves filled with all sorts and sizes and colors of boxes and cans and jars. Onto the store porch.

The wind almost throws me back inside the store. I lower my head and plunge down the steps, which Poppa sprinkled with ashes two or three times before I even got out of bed. The snow crunches under my feet as I walk past the gasoline tanks and approach the bus. The cold burns the walls of my nostrils. My feet are so heavy in the galoshes and my underwear is wrapped so tightly that I can hardly maneuver the first step into the bus.

“Let’s go, Benny,” Mr. Griswold says, growling indeed like Yenta. “We’re late.”

I stumble down the aisle as the bus creeps forward over the snow. I sit alongside Roman.

“Hey,” I say, “poster winners are announced today.”

“I’ll trade you a cheese sandwich,” Roman says. “For a peanut butter.”



Never has Brazil or Argentina seemed more remote.

I hear, as I watch the hands of the clock creep across the face, “...Beef is the major export...Matto Grosso...The Amazon basin makes up nearly half of all South America...Who knows what *export* means?...” My mind, like Yenta’s nose glued to a scent, remains on the coming Assembly.

Miss Curry, short and fat and rosy-cheeked, will waddle onto the stage and—as ten other teachers will be reading in ten other schools—will read, in a voice that sounds as if she’s balancing one of her secret candies behind her front teeth: “The first prize—ten dollars in cash and a gold medal—goes to Benjamin Kahn of our own McCluskey School.” The eyes of every student in the

third grade, and even of the mighty eighth grade, will turn to seek out my face.

To furnish bulk to this fantasy, I pluck out of a familiar niche in my memory the display in the window of Salomon's Shoe Store (*The Finest of Shoes for the Finest of Feet in Summer*).

The snow, already ten inches deep all over the city, threatens to rise another two or three inches as the flakes continue to flutter down. Mr. Salomon's window display is a composition of galoshes, rubbers, high-top shoes and fleece-lined slippers. The window is hung with banners of red and green crepe. Each pair of shoes and galoshes and slippers rests on top of an appropriately gift-wrapped box.

In the center of the display, framed in black velvet, held upright by a velvet-wrapped shoebox, is a pastel drawing of snow-covered hills and dark pine trees. From the window of a tiny cabin hidden beneath one of the trees in the foreground spills a golden light. It throws the two bars of the window onto the snow in the form of a cross. On a piece of white cardboard alongside the drawing two lines of elaborate Gothic print declare:

**Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
Alles Schlaft, Einsam Wacht**

Three exchanges of letters between Reuben and myself were required before Reuben judged the printing acceptable. It took me as long to draw the skeleton of each of the forty-six letters, and then to fill in each skeleton with India ink, as it took me to complete the drawing itself.

Under the Gothic letters, and off to the right, in ordinary and slightly smudged print, are the words:

BENJAMIN KAHN, AGE 8 THIRD GRADE
MCCLUSKEY SCHOOL

Mr. Salomon is very flattered to have Momma in his store. He knows how to impress her.

“Benny? *You* are the Benjamin Kahn painted such a masterpiece? I should have known. Could any other family produce such a talent?”

I try to remain nonchalant as Momma, who’s performing very well the role of the humble mother, assures Mr. Salomon that I did it all alone, printing and all. Not, she knows, like some of the other children whose paintings are displayed in other stores. I am glad she mentions nothing about the cross on the snow and the argument we have had about it.

“It *has* to be there,” I’d said. “There’s light shining through the window.”

“So there’s light. A cross is a cross. You have to paint a cross?”

“It’s a window,” I said. “A window has bars, and bars throw a shadow like a cross.

“Since when there has to be a window in every house? Believe me, I lived in houses there wasn’t a window. Not one. You’re spoiled, all of you, raised in houses with windows. You don’t know.” Rachel and Max and Jacob support me, but Momma shrugs off their arguments. Soon, she says, they’ll be eating bacon.

Mr. Salomon brings up his hand to pat me on the head. Remembering the knuckles of that same hand thumping my skull those times I’ve fallen asleep in the synagogue, I wince.

“Don’t pull away,” he whines at me. “Why do you pull away?”

When Momma and I leave the store Mr. Salomon accompanies us as far as the sidewalk. He hunches his blue-serged shoulders up about his pink snail-shell ears.

“Go in,” Momma says. “You’ll catch cold. Say hello to Fanny.”

“Hello to Chatzkel. When you going to move in town and live like civilized Jews? A family like yours...any community’d be proud to have them.”

“Please,” Momma says, holding up her hand to terminate a conversation she finds too intimate to engage in even with her family, let alone with an acquaintance.



In geography I’d not been called to answer a single question, so my freedom to dream had helped to speed the sixty minutes. But ten minutes after I sit at my desk in civics, Miss Kennedy snaps her fingers at my left earlobe. My hand leaps to soothe the injured ear. I hear Roman’s laughter above the buzzing in my temple.

“Do I have to get a megaphone,” Miss Kennedy asks, “and shout it in your ear?”

“No.”

“No what?”

“No, Miss Kennedy.”

“Then answer my question.”

“I...didn’t hear the question.”

“You mean you weren’t *listening* to the question. Isn’t that correct? You weren’t listening?” She feints a blow at the right ear, and when I reach to defend it she deftly catches me on the left ear again.

“I wasn’t listening.”

Miss Kennedy nods and walks to the front of the class, considering aloud the quantity and quality of my punishment.

During recess, in the hopes that it might prove distracting, I ask to join the kids who’ve been given permission to play outside.

The snow is perfect for fox-and-geese. The six boys stamp out a circumference of a circle and then two diameters. When I'm the fox I pick Roman to be my victim. I chase him around and around the circumference and up and down the diameters until, tripped by Goose, Roman steps into the snow beyond the circle and automatically becomes It. But he leaps on Goose. I leap on him, and three other boys pile on top of us.

Back in our homeroom we meekly accept Miss Grossman's promise of disaster if we behave this way again. We can thank our lucky stars, she tells us, that it's so close to Christmas.

Compelled to stand near the heaters until our pants and stockings are dry means, as we'd hoped it would, that we are to have a reprieve from blackboard work.

I lean against the heater and gaze out through the window, watching the snow fall. I wonder if I should give all the prize money to my mother, or only give the bulk of it and keep a small part for myself. I decide to offer her all of it, knowing that my mother, in turn, will suggest I keep a dollar or two for myself, to spend as I wish. Such a decision satisfies both stomach and conscience.

At lunchtime Miss Grossman will not permit any of us to play outside.

"Some of you," she says, "performed disgracefully at recess. Unfortunately, you all have to suffer now for the sins of the few."

It is more fun inside at lunchtime anyway. We can sit in any seat in the room, and we can talk or sing, or play quiet games or read. I go to the board. Miss Grossman, welcoming the distraction always offered by my drawing at the board, produces a box of colored chalk sticks. The children scurry to find seats in the front row, shouting out their requests.

“Draw cowboys, Bennyl.”

“Horses!”

“Buck Jones.”

“Rin-tin-tin.”

“Draw airplanes, Ben.”

“Santa Claus.”

“The Manger.”

I choose the Three Wise Men.

I sketch in the figures of the Wise Men first. They advance, arms outstretched, gifts in their hands. I am very good at drawing upturned hands. For the moment, I leave vacant the circles which will eventually be heads and faces. The kids are always impressed at the speed and facility, once I turn to the faces, with which I detail the eyes and noses and mouths.

Three camels plod behind the Wise Men. Using five full sticks, I cover the stretch of blackboard with sand-colored chalk. Then, after I color the robes blue and red and yellow, and add depth to the many folds in the robes, I set myself to the faces. As usual everyone, including Miss Grossman, sits transfixed as I quickly mark off eyelids and nostrils and teeth and lips, and then add turbans and beards. Finished, I return to my seat, serene in my glory.

Miss Grossman admires it, her head shaking in awe or disbelief or both.

“I won’t erase it,” she says. “When we come back January third it will still be there. It’s beautiful, Benjamin.”

I brush the chalk dust from my shirt and trousers. I glance at the clock. Two and a half more hours. Then they will toast me, the way they toasted Jacob when he was bar-mitzvahed. Reuben will hold the medal high, its gold face reflecting the candle lights. Momma will beam, tears in her eyes.

A movie in history class cuts the wait to one and a half hours. For fifty minutes, as I watch the movie about the American Revolution, I forget about the contest and I think instead about Valley Forge and General Washington and Patrick Henry. *Give me liberty or give me death...I regret I have but one life to give for my country.* I try to compose an acceptance speech for the prize, but no matter how I word it, it seems to lack the grandeur and the passion of the orators of 1776.

The last class is English. Mr. Uram reads a short story called "The Gift of the Magi." After he finishes reading the story Mr. Uram closes the book and leaves the room. The children remain silent for a moment and then, since there is little likelihood he'll return, they chase each other up and down the aisles. I sit at my desk, trying to decide why I'm so shaken. The terrible melodramatic ironies of O. Henry's story have struck a blow at my easy sense of victory.

Mr. McPhee, the principal, welcomes the students, and then Mrs. Titleman leads the Senior Chorus in the singing of three carols. Miss Grossman recites a poem by Walt Whitman. It is about a noiseless, patient spider. It has nothing to do with Christmas. Everyone giggles at first because it is meaningless, and we are embarrassed for her; but suddenly I, like everyone else, sit quiet...

It launched forth filament, filament...out
of itself
Ever unreeling...tirelessly speeding . . .
And you O my soul where you stand
Surrounded, detached, in measureless
oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throw-
ing, seeking the spheres to connect
them.

Till the bridge you will need be form'd,
till the ductile anchor holds,
Till the gossamer threads you fling catch
somewhere, O my soul.

The rustling of the pages in her book crackles like pistol shots in the silence. She reads "A Winter's Day" and then "A Winter's Night" by Whittier. Betsy Griswold plays a Beethoven sonata on the piano. She's in seventh grade and has red hair. While she plays the sonata, Mary Schneider, who sits beside me, leans over and whispers to me that a lot of girls say Betsy dyes her hair but she, Mary, knows it's very, very natural.

As always, I sit between Mary and Roman. Roman keeps talking about how he is going to double the number of traps he now has set at Connequenessing Creek, so that by spring he'll have enough pelts to buy a shotgun.

While Mr. McPhee goes across the stage to talk to Miss Curry and Mr. Uram, I watch them very carefully to see if they glance in my direction. While they discuss something, Miss Curry gestures with a white envelope she holds in her hand. All the while, Mary is describing the details of a party she is planning to have on her birthday. She asks me twice if I'll come, but I do not reply. I am hypnotized by that white envelope. When Mary leans forward and looks me in the eye, her head blocking out Miss Curry, and asks me again if I'll come, I swallow several times to lubricate my throat so the words "Yes, I'll come" can find their way free.

Mr. McPhee thanks Betsy Griswold for her beautiful sonata, and then he introduces Miss Curry, who, he says, "Has some information about that poster contest in which five of our students were finalists." He looks in my direction. I'm sure it is intentional. Both he and Miss

Curry have raved about my talents, and I'm sure they're both as anxious to inform me, as I am to learn, that I have won.

Give me liberty or give me death. I hear Patrick Henry's ringing voice. All I'll say, I decide, is "Thank you."

Miss Curry waddles across the stage. She adjusts the height of the microphone and says that, first of all, she wants to thank all those students who submitted posters to the contest. Next, she wants to especially thank those five students who were selected as finalists, whose work had such merit, who were credits to McCluskey School.

She calls out the names of the five, and when she says, "Mary Schneider," Mary giggles and blushes. When she says, "Benjamin Kahn," I feel my chest grow hot. I don't know what to do with my hands, but when Roman nudges me and mutters, "Halfers if you win," I jab an elbow into his ribs and he grunts.

Miss Curry says she will open the envelope, just as the envelopes are being opened right now in six other schools in Summer County.

I think I am going to faint. My face burns, and I can hardly breathe. Miss Curry opens the envelope and pulls out a sheet of paper. In a quiet voice she says something about, "The winners of the third annual..."

Mr. McPhee comes over and says something to her and readjusts the microphone. My heart is throbbing so hard I'm sure Roman and Mary can hear it.

Mr. McPhee leaves, and Miss Curry speaks again. This time her voice is loud.

"The winners of the third annual poster contest of the Summer County School System are as follows: first prize to Dorothy Vogel, Meridian Township School; second prize to Rita Nietrezeba, fifth grade, Lyndy School;

and third prize...third prize goes to our own Mary Schneider, third grade, McCluskey School.”

Miss Curry pauses long enough to permit the Assembly to applaud. When the students turn to search Mary out, I continue waiting for Miss Curry to say, “Oh, wait. There’s a mistake. Here’s...”

But she says nothing. She folds the letter, puts it in the envelope and walks off the stage.

I know that if I dare let my lips move to say one single word to Mary or Roman I’ll cry. But I want to shout, I need to shout, “It’s a lie...a mistake...I won!”



In the bus, on the way home, I sit with my cheek against the cold glass. Everyone is singing “Silent Night.” Even Mr. Griswold.

Instead of going through the store, where one of the miners, or Poppa, might ask about the contest, I fight through the snow in the yard and enter through the back door. Yenta, in the tarpaper-covered house that Reuben and I built when she was a puppy, comes out to greet me. Her shaggy yellow head is warm and soft as a mitten against my hand.

Somehow, when I see Reuben, I manage to jump into his arms and pretend nothing’s wrong. I even manage to laugh when he says I’m growing so fast I’ll soon be the biggest man in the house. Before anyone can ask about the contest, I rush upstairs, pretending I want to change clothes. After an entire day the heat seeping up the stairs has had some effect. I stay in my room as long as I can, coming down when Momma finally calls me for supper.

Everyone is sitting around the table. Reuben is talking about college. Then everyone stops talking and waits, indulgent, as Momma lights the candles, waves her

hands across the flames, then throws her hands across her eyes and prays. And weeps. I know enough Hebrew to understand the words *sister...brother...mother...father...death...Paradise...*

She stands before the candles, her body jerking with sobs. Finally, after several minutes, she calms herself and turns to serve the food.

Everyone eats. No one asks about the contest. Reuben talks about the news from Europe, about Russia and Germany and Italy. He studies history in college, and when he says that war is inevitable, I know it's inevitable. Momma begs him to stop talking like that.

Max, who's in the first year of high school, and Jacob, who's in his fourth year, have been absorbing every word spoken at the table. Jacob says that Reuben is simply stating facts. Poppa says no one knows anything, wars come no matter who does what. That's the way things have always been and always will be. Momma bites her lip and gazes fearfully at the small remnant of candle.

Poppa has closed the store so he can enjoy Reuben's first night home without being interrupted. He opens a bottle of elderberry wine and even permits Yenta to come in out of the storm. The kitchen is packed with the aromas of a better-than-usual Friday night dinner. There is kasha soup and roast and homemade bread and boiled potatoes and tomatoes stewed with bread. There are beets and corn that were grown in our garden and canned in our kitchen. They're heated now, along with green beans that Rachel canned. There are kosher pickles from a barrel in one of the back rooms of the store. There will be sponge cake for dessert, and coffee and tea. Simmering on the stove are the bits of chicken fat which, late in the evening, will be rendered with onions and served as a final grand delicacy.

I pick at my food, swallow some and push the rest of it away. I avoid Rachel's eyes, and Reuben's, and I wait for Momma to ask me about the contest. She never does.

Late in the evening, after the table is cleared, everyone continues sitting in the kitchen. Poppa has a great roaring fire in the stove, and Yenta is asleep under the cookstove. Except for Momma and Poppa, who sit there sipping tea through sugar cubes clenched in their teeth, they talk about politics and literature.

I sit beside Yenta, and then I lie beside her, my head on her shoulder. The room seems to roll and tilt under the assaults of voices, cigarette smoke, the odors of food. The wind screeches in the chimney, pries at the frosted window, pushes down on the roof and up at the floor. In the winter I often fall asleep like this, on the floor with Yenta or curled up on two chairs. About midnight Poppa always lifts me and carries me upstairs to bed.

"Look," Rachel says. "Look at Benny."

I do not open my eyes.

"He asleep?"

"He's asleep."

"I saw all the others," Jacob says. "They were *dreck* compared with Benny's."

"Poor Benny," Rachel says. "He was so sure he'd win."

"Everyone told him," Momma says. "Remember?"

"They didn't believe *he* did the painting," Reuben says.

"Either that or they didn't want to give a Christmas prize to a Jew."

"He'll learn," Poppa says.

"But not now," Momma says. "Eight years old? He should learn now, he's only eight years old?"

"Since when," Poppa says, "they save their hate for old people?"

I want to leap up, I want to hide, but I lie there, pretending I'm asleep.

"Now it begins," Poppa says. "It hurts, you're eight years old, you're called such things he'll be called. The bastards! They take it in with their mothers' milk. I better bring him up."

When he lifts me I let my arms and legs flop to give the impression I'm sound asleep. Poppa carries me up the stairs. He undresses me and pulls the covers around me. I smell his sweet-wine breath; his rough cheek scratches my lips.

After he goes down the hallway and down the stairs I lie there, watching the snowflakes swirl across the glass. Is it true? If it's true, if what they said is true, what does it mean? If I did not win the prize just because I'm a Jew then all the rest of my life I'll never win. I'll always lose. If they're wrong—if the prize was not kept from me because I'm a Jew—then my picture just did not deserve the prize. I'm not the best artist. I'm not even second-best. I'm not even third-best.

Someone is climbing the stairs. They come down the hall. It's Rachel. She drops on my bed beside me, and she slides her arm under my head. She tries to soothe me, but a worm of a thought is chewing at my mind, distracting me.

None of them, not even Rachel, has considered the possibility that I don't deserve the prize, that my painting might be inferior. For all of them the fault, the responsibility, the source of evil belongs to someone else. To that mass ambiguous *them*. Could it belong to *me*?

No!

I *do* deserve the prize. My painting *was* the best.

Rachel, barely seven years older than I, with a precocious maternal instinct that is destined to suffer for no other child but me, whispers, “Oh, my poor Benny.”

I yield to her need to comfort me and herself.

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