

CHAPTER

34

How could I give a speech about growing up in the *shtetl* and still sound like an American? I began to list in my head all the things I mustn't mention in my speech—hiding under the dirty old rug when Cossacks came, Ma stealing flour, us digging in the fields for leftover potatoes, Ben getting the fur hat off the dead Cossack. There were so many things. How could I avoid them all? And if I did, what was left to say? I'd just try to make it sound as ordinary as possible.

Finally the day of my speech came. I got up in front of the class, took a shaky breath, and tried to look calm.

"I was born in a little village," I began. "Smaller than Duluth. We lived in a small house. It was—well, sort of different from here." And immediately I wished I hadn't said that.

"What made it different?" someone asked.

"Well, there wasn't electricity," I explained. "And there wasn't as much food. One time, my sister Eva was working as a maid and she got beaten for taking a piece of white bread."

"She was a maid? Didn't she go to school?" a girl asked.

"Girls didn't go to school, and anyway we needed the money."

"How come girls didn't go to school?" another girl wanted to know.

"Because it was only for boys." The more I explained, the less they seemed to understand.

I still had time to fill, so I told about the Cossacks and how scary they were. "One time, my brother, Ben, almost got killed by a Cossack. But he was wearing a tall fur hat. And that saved him."

"If you were so poor, where did he get a fur hat?"

"Well, um, he . . ." I searched for how to say it. "He found it somewhere." But that didn't sound so good, so I tried again. "He didn't steal. He took it. It was um . . . on . . . um . . . a dead Cossack."

"There were dead Cossacks lying around and you just went and took their stuff?" I could tell he didn't believe me.

"What did *you* take?" another boy wanted to know. "A sword or pistol or something?"

I thought about that. Maybe I should tell them I took a sword *and* a pistol. They'd probably believe that more than the truth. But I wasn't sure Miss Fiebiger would. So I just said, "Some soldiers took the weapons. They just left the dead Cossack."

The boys in class looked disappointed but I went on, "That Cossack's hat saved my brother's life. You can even ask him."

"But why didn't the police arrest the Cossacks?"

"There were no police," I explained.

"No police?!" They couldn't imagine it.

"Then why didn't they get the sheriff?" asked another boy.

"What's a sheriff?" I asked. And immediately I knew I shouldn't have.

"What's a sheriff?" the boy snorted. And they all started laughing. "Phil doesn't know what a sheriff is!"

As always, I tried laughing, too. I was back to feeling like Yusig again and wishing my same old wish. If only I'd been born here. If only I knew the important things like sheriffs and not stupid things like Cossacks, which no one believed anyway. Then they'd have nothing to laugh at.

"Quiet!" said my teacher sternly. "Phil has been here less than a year. There's still a lot he doesn't know. But there's also a lot he does know." Her voice grew quiet and firm. "He knows what it's like to be hungry and afraid for his life."

I certainly didn't think that was anything worth knowing. But it did get the class to quit laughing. "We can all learn from each other," she went on. "Thank you, Phil, for telling us about your family's life in Poland."

On the playground that day, a group of boys from my class crowded around me. "What a story!" "You made it up, didn't you?" "How did you think of all that?"

"I don't know," I said, letting them believe what they wanted.

I wished I *had* made it up. I wished none of it were true or, at least, that I could forget everything—wipe it blank like Miss Fiebiger did with her blackboard at the end of the day.

I imagined a big eraser wiping away the whole *shtetl* from inside my head—making it all disappear. Blank. Then if any teacher ever asked me again, I could truthfully say, "I don't remember anything."

The only thing that made my day easier was when Pekka raised his hand and said his new bad word to Miss Fiebiger. I laughed louder than anyone. Miss Fiebiger gave me a stern look. But I kept laughing.

She raised her eyebrow at me. "Please stay after school, Phil."

CHAPTER

35

I hoped Miss Fiebiger wasn't angry with me. Maybe I'd been a little too loud. But was laughing such a terrible thing? She surprised me, though, with something totally different. "I'm sorry the class didn't believe you today, Phil."

"Oh, that's OK," I said, relieved.

"I guess it's hard for them to imagine such a different life," she went on.

"I guess so." I nodded. "Back in the *shtetl*, I never imagined a life like *this*."

"Your life was very hard back there," she said softly. "I don't know how you survived."

"People helped us," I said, wishing I could just go home and be done with the *shtetl*.

But she nodded for me to go on and looked truly interested. So I told her about Ana and the old mittens and socks she used to give us and the small silver cross that saved our lives. Then I found myself telling all about Beryl and his bakery and how he'd kept us from starving.

"What extraordinary people!" she said.

"Yes," I agreed. "But the Cossacks killed Ana and her whole family."

"Oh . . ." Her fingers flew to her lips. "I'm terribly sorry."

"Beryl is still there, though," I added.

She gazed at me. "Just imagine if he could see you now. He'd be so proud of you." She patted my shoulder.

I nodded. But I thought to myself, I'm not so sure he'd be proud of me. I *do* know, though, that he wouldn't recognize me. Miss Fiebiger doesn't know how different I looked back then—shaggy hair, raggedy old clothes. And not only that, I *was* different. Since coming here, I really *had* changed. Everything had. But I couldn't possibly explain all that to her.

I walked home slowly, needing time to think.

Here, the children would laugh if I told them that our Sabbath soup from Beryl was our one good meal a week. They'd snort and say, "That wasn't a meal! That was just soup, silly!" But I knew the truth. It had saved our lives.

Everything about that life was so different from this one. I only knew one thing for sure: Fivel did not belong here.

Yet, as if disagreeing, my *heder* teacher's parting words came sharply back at me, *Fivel . . . don't ever forget who you are*. I could almost feel that stick of his threatening my head.

"I'm not Fivel anymore," I said out loud. "And I don't

want to be either." Again, I wiped the whole *shtetl* from my head with that big eraser. All blank.

"I'm home," I called as I walked through the front door.

"Fivel!" Ma greeted me from the kitchen. That name made a sour taste in my mouth—*immigrant, foreigner*. "You're home late," she went on in Yiddish. "Hurry and get ready for *Shabbos* dinner."

"I will. But please, Ma, call me Phil." I knew I shouldn't make a fuss about it—especially right before *Shabbos*. But somehow, I couldn't stop myself. "We're in America now. And that's my name."

Ma gave a not-this-again look and wiped her hands on her apron. "To me you're still Fivel."

Pa gave me a raised eyebrow so I let it be. He was home from the farm. It was always good to have him with us. I went over and gave him a big hug.

We all gathered around the dinner table. In my head, I called each of us by our American names: Helen, Eva, Ruth, Ben, and me, Phil.

We need these names, I reasoned with Ma in my head. We're not in the *shtetl* anymore.

I looked at the table all set for *Shabbos*. So different from back there. Plenty of food—a real feast. Then I caught myself. At school, the children would laugh at me for saying that. "Phil doesn't know what a feast is. Ha, ha, ha."

For them, this was just another meal.

How could the same food be two such different things?

For the first time in a long time, I thought back to how I used to gaze into the Sabbath candle flames and imagine Pa's face. He'd been so far away back then—impossibly far.

Now I leaned over and hugged him extra hard. "*Git Shabbos, Pa.*"

He hugged me back. "*Git Shabbos, Fivel, my boy.*"

"Phil," I reminded him.

Pa ruffled my hair. "Phil, Fivel." He shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

"A lot," I told him. "I want to be Phil, a real American. Not Fivel from the *shtetl*." And I said Fivel and *shtetl* almost as if they were bad words.

A shadow of displeasure crossed Ma's face. But she calmly lit the candles and sang the *Shabbos* blessings.

I didn't want to think about the *shtetl*. It made me all mixed up inside. Until today, I hadn't even thought much about Beryl. And back there I'd promised to think of him every day. He had looked so pleased when I'd told him that.

But I'd been busy becoming American. I didn't have time. Now a terrible thought came to me. What if somehow, when I'd been erasing everything, I'd erased Beryl's face? That's all I had of him—a picture in my head. What if it was gone?

I gazed into the candle flames, closed my eyes, and got that same floating feeling I used to get with Pa. *Beryl, I want to see you.* But just as I feared, his face was gone.

Please, Beryl. I tried again. *Please.* But still nothing. I must've really erased him.

I squeezed my eyes tighter. *Beryl, I need to see you. I don't want to forget you.* And suddenly, there he was—just as always—with kindness filling his whole face. His smile seemed to say, Your new haircut and new clothes don't fool me one bit. You're still my Fivel.

My Fivel. That's just what he'd say, too. Not Phil. I suddenly realized, never Phil.

Quickly, before I lost the picture, I wrapped my arms around him. *Git Shabbos, Beryl.* And I thought to myself maybe right now he's thinking of me. I opened my eyes.

Ma gave me a rare, tender look almost as if she'd seen me hugging him right inside my head. "*Git Shabbos, Fivel,*" she said. And strangely, it didn't bother me. In fact, though I can't explain why, being called Fivel suddenly seemed awfully important.

"*Git Shabbos, Ma.*" I patted her hand, but it was more like *sorry* or maybe even *thank you*. I took a piece of *Shabbos* bread and ate slowly.

Now my *heder* teacher's words made real sense. *Don't ever forget who you are.* But who was I? Phil or Fivel? It was all too confusing. I only knew one thing for sure.

There was a great big ocean in between those two names. And no bridge.

But, as if disagreeing, the bridge to America popped into my head—just the way it used to be back in the *shtetl*. I could see it as clearly as Beryl's face. My own bridge. And there I was walking on it. It made no sense, but somehow it did make sense. I could imagine myself walking back and forth across that bridge my whole life.

Maybe that's who I was. A boy with two worlds inside and a bridge that no one else could see.

The next day at school, boys on the playground were teasing Pekka again. "Pekka, Pekka." They made clucking sounds.

Later, when they'd finally left him alone, I went up to him.

"You need an American name," I told him, just as my Uncle Ralph had told me. "From now on, you'll be Peter." I grinned, hoping for a big smile back.

But he shook his head, ragged blond hair falling in his eyes. "No. I'm Pekka—like my pa and his pa. Not Peter. It's, it's not . . ." He struggled to explain. "It's not right." His face turned flat and lonely. "They're dead."

"Oh," I said, not knowing what else to say. Suddenly I really wanted to do something for him. "Well . . ." I tried again, "next time the boys teach you a bad word, I'll give you a wink—like this." I showed him. "Then you'll know not to use it in class."

Pekka pushed the hair out of his eyes and smiled. "Thanks."

"That's OK," I told him. I could almost feel Beryl beaming at me, even from a world away. "I know what it's like," I added. "I'm an immigrant, too."