

MOMIK



IT WAS LIKE THIS, a few months after Grandma Henny was buried in her grave, Momik got a new grandfather. This grandfather arrived in the Hebrew month of Shebat in the year 5317 of the Creation, which is 1959 by the other calendar, not through the special radio program *Greetings from New Immigrants* which Momik had to listen to every day at lunch between 1:20 and 1:30, keeping his ears open in case they called out one of the names on the list Papa wrote down for him on a piece of paper; no, Grandfather arrived in a blue Mogen David ambulance that pulled up in front of Bella Marcus's café-grocery store in the middle of a rainstorm, and this big fat man, dark but like us, not a shvartzer, stepped out and asked Bella if she knew anyone around here called Neuman, and Bella got scared and wiped her hands on her apron and said, Yes, yes, did something happen, God forbid? And the man said, Don't get excited, lady, nothing happened, what can happen. No, I bring them a relative, see, and he thumbed backward over his shoulder at the ambulance in the street which seemed empty and quiet, and Bella suddenly turned as white as this wall and everybody knows she isn't scared of anything, but she wouldn't go anywhere near the ambulance, she only edged closer to Momik, who was doing Bible homework at one of the little tables, and said, "Vay iz mir," a relative now? And the man said, "Nu, lady we don't got all day, so if you know these people maybe you can tell me where they are, because is nobody home." He talked broken Hebrew like that even though he didn't look so much like a newcomer, and Bella said to him, Sure, what did you

expect, sure nobody's home, because these people are not parasites, these people work plenty hard for their bread, morning to night they're working in the lottery booth two streets down, and this little boy here, he's theirs, so just you wait a minute, mister, I'm going to run get them. And she ran out with her apron still on and then the man winked at Momik, and when Momik didn't do anything because he knows how you're supposed to behave around strangers, the man shrugged his shoulders and started reading the newspaper Bella left there and he said to the air, Even with this rain we're having, seems like it's going to be a drought year, yeah, that's all we need. And Momik who is usually well-mannered didn't hang around for more but ran outside to the ambulance and climbed up on the back step, wiped the rain from the little round window, and peered inside where the oldest man in the world was swimming like maybe a fish in an aquarium. He wore blue-striped pajamas and was all wrinkled like Grandma before she died. His skin was yellowish-brown, like a turtle's, sagging down around his skinny neck and arms, his head was bald, and his eyes were blank and blue. He was swimming hard through the ambulance air, and Momik remembered the sad Swiss farmer from Aunt Idka and Uncle Shimmik in the little glass ball with the snowflakes which he had accidentally broken once, and he opened the door without a second thought, but then he jumped back when he heard the old man talking to himself in a weird voice that went up and down excitedly, and then sounded almost like crying, as if he were in some play or telling a tall tale, but at the same time, and this is what's so hard to understand, Momik was one thousand percent sure that this old man was Anshel, Grandma Henny's little brother, Mama's uncle, the one everybody said Momik looked like, especially around the chin and forehead and nose, the one who wrote children's stories for magazines in Europe, but didn't Anshel die by the Nazis, may-their-name-be-blotted-out, and this one is alive all right and Momik hoped his parents would agree to keep him in the house because after Grandma Henny died Mama said that all she wanted now was to live out her life in peace, and suddenly there was Mama with Bella hobbling after her on ailing legs, lucky break for Marilyn Monroe, and she yelled at Mama in Yiddish to calm down, you shouldn't upset the child, and behind them trudged the great giant his papa, panting and red in the face, and Momik thought it really must be serious for both of them to leave the booth together. Anyway, the ambulance

driver calmly folded the newspaper and asked if they were the Neumans, the family from the late Henny Wasserman, rest her soul, and Mama said, Yes she was my mother, what happened? and the fat driver smiled a big fat smile and said, Nothing happened, why are always people expecting something happened; no we came to deliver just the grandfather to you, a mazel tov. And they all went around to the back of the ambulance and the driver opened the door and climbed in and lifted the old man lightly in his arms and Mama cried, Oy, no, it can't be, it's Anshel, and first she sort of swayed and Bella ran to the café and brought a chair back just in time and the driver said, There, there, we didn't bring to you bad news, God forbid, and after setting the old man down on his feet he gave him a friendly slap on the back which was bony and crooked and he said, Nu, Mr. Wasserman, so here's the mishpocheh, and to Mama and Papa he said, Ten years he's been with us at the insane house in Bat Yam, and you never know what he's talking to himself like now, maybe praying or who knows, and he doesn't hear what you say like a deaf man nebuch, so here's the mishpocheh! he screamed in Grandfather's ear to prove to everyone that he really was deaf, ach, like a stone, who knows what they did to him there, may-their-name-be-blotted-out! and nu, we don't even know which camp he was by or what, there came out people in a worse condition, you should see, no, better you shouldn't see, but now one month ago he all of a sudden opens his mouth and says the names of people, like Mrs. Henny Mintz, and our boss, he made like a detective and so he found out that those names he says are the names of people dead, may-they-rest-in-peace, and the list shows Mrs. Mintz here in this house, but she's dead too now, may-she-rest-in-peace, so you are the only family left, and it doesn't look like Mr. Wasserman will be getting any healthier and he can eat by himself already and, you should pardon the expression, make his duty by himself, and this country nebuch isn't so rich, and the doctors say in his condition he can be looked after in the home, family is family right? So here are his clothes and his papers and things and his prescriptions too for medicines that he takes, he's a sweet old man, and quiet too, except for the noises and all the moving around, but not too bad, nothing serious, everybody likes him, they call him the Malevsky family, because he all the time sings, that's a joke, see, now say hello to the children! he shouted in the old man's ear. Ach nothing, like a stone, here, Mr. Neuman, you sign here and here that

I bring him to you, maybe you got an ID or something with you? No? Never mind, I believe you anyway. Nu, shoin, well, a mazel tov, this is a happy day like a new baby coming to you, oh sure, you get used to him, so now we better be heading back to Bat Yam, plenty of work waiting there, so goodbye, Mr. Wasserman, don't forget us! And he smiled cheerfully in the old man's face, though Grandfather didn't seem to notice, and got into the ambulance and drove away, fast.

Bella ran to fetch Mama a piece of lemon to give her some strength. Papa stood still and stared at the rain running into the empty gully where the city was supposed to have planted a pine tree. The rain trickled down Mama's face as she sat on the chair with her eyes shut. She was so short her feet didn't touch the ground. Momik took the old man by his bony hand and gently led him under the awning of Bella's grocery store. Momik and the old man were about the same height because the old man was all hunched over and had a little hump at the back of his neck. And then all of a sudden Momik noticed there was a number on the new grandfather's arm, like Papa's and Aunt Idka's and Bella's, although Momik could see right away it was a different kind of number and he tried to memorize it but Bella came back with the lemon meanwhile and started rubbing Mama's temples with it and the air smelled good but Momik kept waiting because he knew Mama wouldn't wake up so soon.

And who should come walking down the street just then but Max and Moritz, whose real names were Ginzburg and Zeidman, though nobody remembers that anymore except for Momik who remembers everything. They were inseparable, those two. They lived together in the storeroom at Building Number 12, where they kept the rags and all the junk they collected. Once when city inspectors came to kick them out of the storeroom, Bella screamed so loud they beat it out of there. Max and Moritz never talked to anyone outside of each other. Ginzburg who was filthy and smelly always walked around saying, Who am I who am I, but that's because he lost his memories on account of those Nazis, may-their-name-be-blotted-out, and the small one, Zeidman, just smiled at everyone all the time and they said he was empty inside. They never went anywhere without each other, Ginzburg the dark one leading, Zeidman behind him carrying the old black briefcase you could smell a mile away, grinning at the air. Whenever Mama used to see them coming she would mutter, Oif alle poste palder, oif alle viste

valder, a calamity in the empty fields and the empty woods, and of course she told Momik never to go anywhere near the two of them, but he knew they were all right, because Bella didn't let the city inspectors kick them out of the storeroom, although she did call them funny names like Mupim and Chupim and Pat and Patashon, who were these cartoon characters back where they all came from.

So it was pretty weird how this time the two of them walked slowly by and didn't seem to be afraid of anyone and they stepped right up to Grandfather and looked him over and as Momik watched Grandfather he noticed his nose twitching as though he could smell them, which doesn't mean a whole lot since Ginzburg you could smell even without a nose, but this was something else because all of a sudden Grandfather stopped singing his tune and stared at the two dodos, which is another name Mama called them, and Momik saw the three of them stiffening as if they all had the same feeling, and then the new grandfather suddenly swerved around like he was angry he'd wasted his time which he had no business wasting and he sang that stupid tune again as if he couldn't see anything and paddled through the air like he was swimming or talking to someone who wasn't there, and Max and Moritz stared at him, and the small one, Zeidman, started making noises and moving around the way Grandfather does, he's always copying people, and Ginzburg growled and started to walk away, with Zeidman following in his trail. And you also always see them together on the stamps Momik draws for the royal kingdom.

So anyway, meanwhile Mama stood up white as this wall, all weak and wobbly and Bella braced her and said, Lean on me, Gisella, and Mama wouldn't even look at the new grandfather and she said to Bella, This will kill me, mark my words, why doesn't God just leave us in peace and let us live a little, and Bella said, Tfu, tfu, Gisella, what are you saying, this is not a cat, this is a live human being, you shouldn't talk that way, and Mama said, It's not enough I'm an orphan, not enough we had so much suffering from my mother, now this, now everything all over again, look at him, look how he looks, he's coming here to die, that's what, and Bella said, Sha sha, and held her hand and they huddled together next to Grandfather but Mama wouldn't look at him and then Papa coughed, Nu, why are you standing there, and he bravely put his hand on the old man's shoulder and looked at Momik with a shy expression and led the old man away, and Momik, who

already knew he would call the old man Grandfather even though he wasn't his real grandfather, told himself that if the old man didn't die when Papa touched him, that must mean a person from Over There is safe from harm.

The same day, Momik went to search in the cellar. He'd always been afraid to go down to the cellar because of the dark and the dirt, but this time he had to. There, together with the big brass beds and the mattresses with straw sticking out and the bundles of clothes and the piles of shoes was Grandma Henny's kifat, a kind of box you tie up, with all the clothes and stuff she brought from Over There and this book called a *Teitsh Chumash* and also the *Tzena u-Rena*, and the bread board Grandma Henny used there for making pastry dough and three bags full of goose feathers she had dragged halfway around the world in boats and trains braving terrible dangers just so she could make herself a feather quilt in Eretz Yisrael to keep her feet warm, but when she arrived it turned out that Aunt Idka and Uncle Shimmik, who got here first and quickly made a lot of money, had already bought a double feather quilt, so the feathers stayed in the cellar where pretty soon they caught mildew and other cholerias, but you don't throw out a thing like that around here. So anyway, the point is that at the bottom of the kifat was a notebook with Grandma's Yiddish notes, all her memories like from the days when she still had a memory, but then Momik remembered that a long time ago before he could even read, before he'd turned into an alter kopf, which means the head of a smart old man, Grandma showed him a page from an old, old magazine, and in it was a story by Grandma Henny's brother, this Anshel, written one hundred years ago, but Mama got mad at Grandma for upsetting the boy with things that are no more and shouldn't be mentioned, and sure enough the magazine page was still in the notebook but when Momik picked it up it started to crumble, so he carried it between the pages of the notebook with a fluttering heart and sat down on the kifat to tie it back up with the ropes but he was too light so he left it open because he wanted to get out fast but suddenly he had an idea that was so strange he just stood still and forgot what he wanted to do next, but his thingy knew and he made it out just in time to piss under the stairwell, which is what always happens to him when he goes down to the cellar.

So anyway, he sneaked the notebook into the house without anyone

noticing, and ran to his room and opened it and saw that the page had crumbled a little more on the way and the top corner was torn off. The page was yellow and cracked like the earth after a long time without rain and Momik knew right away he'd have to copy what it said on another piece of paper, otherwise, kaput. He found his spy notebook under the mattress and, wild with excitement, he wrote out the story on the torn page, word for word.

THE CHILDREN OF THE HEART *Rescue the Red Sk*

A story in fifty chapters by the popular auth

Anshel Wasserman-Scheheraz

Chapter the Twenty-seventh

O Constant Reader! In our previous episode, we saw the Children of the Heart swiftly borne upon the wings of the "Leap in Time" machine: destination—the lesser luminary called the moon. This machine was the product of the craft and intelligence of the wise Sergei, whose mastery of technics and the currents of electricity in the case of the magnificent machine we did so fully elucidate in our foregoing chapter, whither we refer our Constant Reader for the sundry particulars effaced from memory. And so, aboard the machine, arm in arm with the Children of the Order, were Red Men of the Navajo tribe and their proud king, who rejoiced in the name: Red Slipper (mayhap our Amiable Reader knows of the Red Skin's predilection for suchlike names fantastical, though we may smile to hear them!). And together they fled the truculence of the martial men who would drive them from the land of their fathers, chief among these the sanguineous native of the country of England, John Lee Stewart. Thus they betook themselves to the moon for shelter and succor in their distress, in the hope likewise of turning a new leaf in the copybook of their wretched lives. Lo! The wondrous machine traverses the stars, and breaches the rings of Saturn, streaked with gossamer, swift as light! And on they venture while the amiable Otto Brig, first and foremost among the Children of the Heart, to soothe the spirits of the Red Skins (so lately delivered from the hands of their enemies, and whisked aloft in the chariot of fire) rehearsed for them the glorious deeds of the Children of the Heart, anent our Faithful Reader is informed to the last letter and with which we shall not tire him at this time. And Otto's young sister, blithe Paula of the golden hair, prepared a repast for the company to refresh their troubled minds and flagging spirits. And Albert Fried, the silent boy, was just then sitting privily

at the helm, nobly pondering whether humankind should ever set foot upon the moon, since as the Amiable Reader knows so well, Albert Fried was conversant with every sort of creature, from lice eggs to horned buffaloes, and likewise the language of each, as was King Solomon of yore, and he hastened to find his small copybook in which to record the scientific facts he would observe in short order, for our friend Albert Fried is a lover of order, and it well behooves the younger readers amongst us to follow his example in this and other matters. And as he was writing, the dulcet murmur of a flute fell upon his ears, and this so astonished him that he rose to his feet and approached the hall of passage. In the doorway he stood, bewildered by the sight which met his eyes: for there stood Harotian, the small Armenian fellow, a wizard skilled in every work of wonder and of sorcery, piping for the company, whilst the melody he played so nimbly upon his flute becalmed the anxious hearts of the Red Skins and allayed their fears. The piping was balm to them, and small wonder: for little Harotian himself had long ago been rescued by the Children of the Heart when the Turks of Turkestan plundered a village in the hills of Armenia, and Harotian alone was spared, as fully recounted in the adventuresome tale entitled "The Children of the Heart Rescue the People of Armenia," and the young Harotian was touched to the heart by the sadness of these voyagers. And meanwhile, as Sergei was standing watch on deck, a heavy cloud descended, for he grasped in his hand the horn of vision that magnifies two-hundred-fold, and screamed: "Woe is he who faces such calamity! Flee! To the moon!" And they beheld it, and were filled with horror. Otto their leader looked through the horn of vision, and his heart stopped, his face turned ashen, while Paula clasped his hand, screaming: "For God's sake, Otto, what is it that you saw?" But Otto's tongue was pinched and doughlike, and no reply could he make, though his face bore testimony to the evil which had befallen them all, and horror, perhaps Death, lurked at the window.

Continued in next week's issue of

LITTLE LIGHTS***

This was the story Momik found in the magazine, and as soon as he started copying it down in his spy notebook he knew it was the most exciting story ever written, and the paper smelled about a thousand years old and seemed to come out of a Bible with all those biblical-looking words Momik knew he would never understand no matter how

many thousands of times he read the page over, because to get the meaning of a story like this you need a commentary by Rashi or somebody because people don't talk that way anymore except maybe Grandfather Anshel, though even without understanding every word in it you could tell this story was the origin of every book and work of literature ever written, and the books that came later were merely imitations of this page Momik had been lucky enough to find like a hidden treasure, and he felt that once he knew this he would know just about everything, and then he wouldn't have to go to school anymore, so right away he started to memorize it because brains he's got, bless him, and it only took him a week to learn it all by heart, and he would recite while getting ready for bed: "Harotian, the small Armenian fellow, a wizard skilled in every work of wonder and of sorcery, piping for the company," etc., or on his way to school the next morning, till he got so caught up in the story he couldn't stop wondering what that awful thing they saw on the moon through the horn of vision was, and sometimes he would try to guess how the story ended, though he knew a real Bible ending was something only Grandfather Anshel could invent, but Grandfather Anshel hadn't.

Mama and Papa decided Grandfather should have the small room Grandma Henny used to live in, but he wasn't anything like Grandma Henny. He couldn't sit still for one minute and even in his sleep he twitched and gabbled and flapped his arms around. Whenever they locked him in the house he would cry and make such a scene they had to let him out. In the morning after Mama and Papa left for the lottery booth and Momik had gone off to school, Grandfather Anshel would walk up and down the street till he was tired and then he would go sit on the green bench outside Bella's grocery-café and talk to himself. Grandfather stayed with Momik and his parents for a total of five months before he disappeared. The first week of his stay, Momik started drawing pictures of him on the imperial stamps, with the legend "Anshel Wasserman: Hebrew Writer Who Perished in the Holocaust." Bella brought a weak glass of tea out for Grandfather. She reminded him gently, "Mendarf pishen, Mr. Wasserman," and led him to her toilet like a child. Bella is a real angel from heaven. Her husband, Hezekel Marcus, died a very long time ago and left her all alone with Joshua, a difficult child and a bit meshuggeneh, and with these ten fingers here Bella made an army officer out of him and a college graduate too.

Besides Joshua, Hezkel left her his own father, old Mr. Aaron Marcus—zal er zein gezunt und shtark, may he be healthy and strong—who was sick and weak and feeble-minded and hardly ever left his bed anymore, and Bella, whom Hezkel used to treat like a real queen—and he wouldn't even let her move a glass from here to here—did not sit around the house with her feet up all day long after Hezkel died but went out to work in the little grocery store so as not to lose the regular customers at least, and she even expanded and brought in three more tables and a soda fountain and an espresso machine, and Bella was on her feet from dawn till dusk spitting blood, only her pillow knows how many tears she cried, but Joshua never went hungry, and nobody ever died of hard work.

Bella's café served breakfast specials and home-cooked meals for people of taste. Momik remembered the words "people of taste" because he was the one who wrote the menus three times (for Bella's three tables), and decorated them with drawings of people looking all fat and smily after eating such a good meal at Bella's. And she served home-baked cookies too, fresher than Bella, as she would tell anyone who asked her, though not too many people asked these days, because hardly anyone ever came in besides the Moroccan construction workers from the new housing developments at Beit Mazmil who showed up around ten in the morning for a quart of milk, a loaf of bread, and a cup of yogurt, or the few neighborhood customers and then of course Momik. Only Momik didn't pay. The other regulars stopped shopping there when the new modern supermarket opened at the shopping center where they gave a free set of cork coasters for buying thirty pounds worth of groceries, as if people always had a glass of tea on a coaster with the princess, and now they rush over like maybe they're going to find gold there instead of smoked fish and radishes, and also because everyone gets to push a solid-steel shopping cart around, says Bella, not really angry, and whenever she mentions the supermarket, Momik blushes and looks the other way, because he goes there too sometimes to see the lights and all the stuff they sell and the cash registers that ring, and how they kill the carp in the fish tank, but she doesn't mind so much about her regular customers leaving (says Bella), or that rich she'll never be, tell me, does Rockefeller eat two dinners, does Rothschild sleep on two beds, no, what bothers her most is the tedium, the boredom, and if things go on like this much longer she'll go out and

scrub floors rather than sit around here all day, because to Hollywood she won't be going, not this year, because of her legs maybe, so Marilyn Monroe can relax with that new Jewish husband of hers. Bella sits at one of the empty tables all day long reading *Woman's Own*, and *Evening News*, smoking one Savyon cigarette after another. Bella isn't afraid of anything, and she always says exactly what she thinks, which is why when the city inspectors came to throw Max and Moritz out of the storeroom, she gave them such a piece of her mind they had a conscience for the rest of their lives, and she wasn't even afraid of Ben-Gurion and called him "The Little Dictator from Plonsk," but she didn't always talk that way, because don't forget that like all the grownups Momik knew Bella came from Over There, a place you weren't supposed to talk about too much, only think about in your heart and sigh with a drawn-out krechitz, oyyyyy, the way they always do, but Bella is different from the others somehow and Momik heard some really important things from her about it, and even though she wasn't supposed to reveal any secrets, she did drop hints about her parents' home Over There, and it was from her that Momik first heard about the Nazi Beast.

The truth is, in the beginning Momik thought Bella meant some imaginary monster or a huge dinosaur that once lived in the world which everyone was afraid of now. But he didn't dare ask anyone who or what. And then when the new grandfather showed up and Momik's mama and papa screamed and suffered at night worse than ever, and things were getting impossible, Momik decided to ask Bella again, and Bella snapped back that there are some things, thank God, a nine-year-old boy doesn't have to know yet, and she undid his collar button with a frown, saying it choked her just to see him buttoned up like that, but Momik decided to persist this time and he asked her straight out what kind of animal is the Nazi Beast (since he knew there weren't any imaginary animals in the world and surely no dinosaurs either), and Bella took a long puff on her cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray and gave a krechitz, and looked at him, and screwed her mouth up and didn't want to say, but she let it slip out that the Nazi Beast could come out of any kind of animal if it got the right care and nourishment, and then she quickly lit another cigarette, and her fingers shook a little, and Momik saw he wasn't going to get any more from her this time, and he went out to the street, thoughtfully dragging his schoolbag along the wet pavement, buttoning his collar absentmindedly, and then

he stood contemplating that Grandfather Anshel of his, sitting on the green bench across the street as usual, lost in his own world, waving his hands while he argued with the invisible somebody who never gave him a moment's rest, but the interesting thing is that Grandfather wasn't alone on the bench anymore.

It seems that in the past few days, without his noticing, Grandfather had started to collect all kinds of people around him. In fact they were these very old people nobody had noticed in the neighborhood before, or if anyone did notice them, they tried not to talk about them, people like Ginzburg and Zeidman for example, who'd walk up and stare in his face, and Zeidman would start making signs like Grandfather right away, because he always does what other people do, and then came Yedidya Munin who sleeps in the empty synagogue with all the martyred saints. Yedidya Munin is the one who walks bowlegged because of his hernia, and wears two pairs of glasses one on top of the other, one for the sun and the other not, and children are absolutely forbidden to go anywhere near him because he's obscene, but Momik knows Munin is really a good person, that all he wants in life is to love someone from a fine, distinguished family, and to make children with her in his own special way, which is why every Friday Momik secretly takes Bella's newspapers and clips out the personal ads of the famous Mrs. Esther Levine, modern matchmaker and leading expert in arranging contacts with visitors from overseas, but no one is allowed to know this, God forbid. And then came Mr. Aaron Marcus, father of Bella's Hezkel, whom nobody had seen for ten years and all the neighbors said Kaddish over him already, and here he was, alive, looking nice and all dressed up (well, Bella wasn't about to let him go out to the street looking like a shlumper), only his face, God help him, was twitching and cracking into a thousand and one faces you wouldn't want to see. And then came Mrs. Hannah Zeitrin, whose husband the tailor deserted her, may-his-name-be-blotted-out, and now she is a living widow, that's what she's always hollering and screaming and it was lucky the compensation money came in, because otherwise she would have died of starvation, God forbid, because the tailor, pshakrev, didn't even leave her the dirt under his fingernails, everything he took with him cholera, and Mrs. Zeitrin is a very good woman, but she's also a whore and she mates with shvartzers, a shvartz yar oif ir, a black year on her, as Mama says whenever she walks by, and Mrs. Zeitrin really does do that with

Sasson Sasson, a fullback on the Jerusalem Ha Poel soccer team, and with Victor Arussi, who's a taxi driver, and also with Azura, the butcher from the shopping center whose hair is full of feathers, and who looks like a nice guy actually, the kind that wouldn't mate, but everyone knows he does. At first Momik hated Hannah with a black hatred, and he swore he would only marry somebody from a fine, distinguished family, like the women in the ads of Esther Levine the matchmaker, somebody who would love him for his handsomeness and intelligence and shyness, and who would never mate with others, but once when he said something about Hannah Zeitrin to Bella, Bella got angry with him and said what a poor woman Hannah Zeitrin is, and you should pity her, the way you should pity everyone, and you don't know everything about what happened to Hannah Over There, she never dreamed when she was born that this is how she would end up, sure everyone has hopes and dreams in the beginning, that's what Bella said, so then Momik started to understand Hannah a little differently, and he saw that she was very beautiful kind of, with her big blond wig like Marilyn Monroe, and her big red face with the nice little mustache, and her swollen legs all bandaged up; she's pretty in a way, only she hates her body and she scratches herself with her fingernails, and calls her body my furnace, my tragedy, and it was Munin who explained to him that she screams like that because she needs to mate all the time, because otherwise she'll go out somewhere or something, and that's the reason the tailor ran away from her, because he isn't made of steel you know, and also he had some kind of problem with horns, and that was something Momik would have to find out about from Bella, and these stories began to worry him a little, because what if someday none of her maters showed up and she happened to see Momik walking up the street? But thank God it didn't happen, and another thing is that Mrs. Zeitrin is also angry with God, and she shakes her fists at Him and makes all kinds of not-so-nice gestures, and she screams and curses at Him in Polish, which is bad enough, but then she starts swearing in Yiddish too, which you can be sure He understands. And all she wants is for Him to dare show His face, just once, to a simple woman from Dinov, but anyway, He hasn't dared so far, and every time she starts screaming that way and running up and down the street Momik dashes to the window for a view of the meeting, because how long will God be able to control Himself with all her insults, and everyone listening yet; what,

is He made of steel? And now Mrs. Zeitrin has also been turning up at the bench and sitting next to Grandfather, but nicely, like a good little girl, still scratching herself all over, but quietly, without screaming or fighting with anyone, because even she could see that, deep inside, Grandfather is a very gentle man.

Momik is too shy to walk up to them, so instead he kind of moseys by, dragging his schoolbag along the sidewalk, till all of a sudden there he is, casually standing beside the bench where he can hear what they're saying in Yiddish, which is a slightly different Yiddish from the kind Mama and Papa speak, though in fact he understands every word: Our rabbi, whispers little Zeidman, was such a smart man even the top doctors declared he had two brains! And Yedidya Munin says, Eht! (a noise they all make). Our rebbeleh in Neustadt, the "yanukeh," they called him, he met his end There too, nebuch, he didn't want to write his commentaries in a book, nu, sure, the greatest Hasidim didn't always want to, so what happens? I tell you what happens: three things the little rebbe of blessed memory had to realize were signs from Above! You hear me, Mr. Wasserman? From Above! And in Dinov, says Mrs. Zeitrin to no one in particular, in Dinov where I come from, Jagiello's monument in the square was fifty meters high maybe and all marble! Imported marble!

Momik is so excited he forgets to shut his mouth! Because they're talking freely about Over There! It's almost dangerous the way they let themselves talk about it, but he has to make the most of this opportunity and remember everything, everything, and then run home and write it down in his notebook, and draw pictures too, because some things it's better to draw. So that when they talk about certain places Over There, for instance, he can sketch them in the secret atlas he's preparing. Like that mountain Mr. Marcus talks about, he can draw it in now, that huge mountain the goyim Over There call Jew Mountain, which is a magic mountain, so help us both, Mr. Wasserman, if you happened to find something up there, it disappeared before you got it home, a terrible sight! *Schrecklich!* And wood you gathered on the mountain, it wouldn't catch fire! It burned but was not consumed! That's what Mr. Marcus said, changing faces at incredible speed, God help us, but Mr. Munin tugs Grandfather's coat sleeve like a child and says, Another thing, Mr. Wasserman, in Neustadt where I come from there was a man called Weintraub, Shaya Weintraub, they called him. A young fellow. A boy.

But such a genius! Even in Warsaw they heard of him! He received a special award from the Minister of Education himself! Imagine that, the Pole gave him an award! Now listen to this, says Mr. Munin, digging deeper than usual in his pocket (searching for a treasure any beggar can find, says Bella), this Weintraub, if you asked him in the month of Tammuz, Tammuz shall we say, Please, Shaya, tell me how many minutes to go, God willing, before next Passover, you hear that, minutes, not days, not weeks, and then, just like that, may we both live to see our children married, Mr. Wasserman, he gives you the exact answer, like a regular robot. And Mrs. Hannah Zeitrin stops scratching and hitching her skirt up to scratch the top of her legs, and she looks at Munin and asks with a sneer, Would this Weintraub be the one with a head like an ear of corn by any chance, God forbid, the one that moved to Krakov? And Mr. Munin who seems kind of annoyed suddenly says in a quieter voice, Yes, that's the fellow, a genius like no other . . . and Hannah Zeitrin throws her head back, with a screechy-sounding laugh and says, And what became of him? Shaya Weintraub played the stock market and sank down down down. A genius, ha!

And they talk on and on this way, never stopping or listening to each other, to a singsong Momik has heard before somewhere, though he can't remember where exactly, speaking the language of Over There, the top-secret codes and passwords, recklessly, brashly saying: District of Lubov, Bzjozov Province, and the old cattle market, the big fire at the Klauiz, army work, protection, apostate out of spite, Red Feige Lea and Black Feige Lea, and the Goldenh Bergel, the golden hill outside Zeidman's town where the King of Sweden buried caskets filled with gold when he fled the Russian Army, ach, and Momik swallows hard and remembers it all, for this kind of thing he has an excellent mind, a real alter kopf head, okay, so a Shaya Weintraub, a regular robot, he isn't yet, but Momik too can tell you on the spot how many gym classes to go before summer vacation, and how many hours of school (minutes too), not to mention some of the other things he knows, like his prophecies, because Momik is practically a prophet, a kind of Merlin the Magician, why he can guess when the next surprise quiz in arithmetic is going to be, and Miss Aliza, the teacher, actually did walk in and say, Please put away your notebooks, boys and girls, and take out paper and pencil. And the children stared at Momik in amazement, but that prophecy was a cinch because three months earlier

when Papa went to have his heart checked at Bikkur Cholim Hospital they had a quiz, and Momik gets a bit nervous whenever Papa goes for his heart checkup, which is why he remembered, and next time Papa went they had another surprise quiz, so after that Momik guessed that four weeks from Monday Miss Aliza would give another quiz, but the other children don't understand this type of thing, for them four weeks is too long a time to measure, so they think Momik is a magician, but anyone who has a spy notebook and writes down everything that happens can tell that things that happen once will happen again, so Momik drives the children crazy with his accurate, spylike prediction about the tank column crossing the Malcha road once every twenty-one days at ten o'clock in the morning, and he can also tell (it spooks him too) the next time those ugly pimples are going to pop out all over Netta the science teacher's face, but these are silly prophecies, hocus-pocus stuff to make the kids respect him and stop teasing him, because the really big prophecies are for Momik alone, there's no one he can tell them to, like spying on his parents, and all the spy work to put together the vanished land of Over There like a jigsaw puzzle, there's still a lot of work left on this, and he's the only one in the whole wide world who can do it, because who else can save Mama and Papa from their fears and silences and krechtes, and the curse, which was even worse after Grandfather Anshel turned up and made them remember all the things they were trying so hard to forget and not tell anyone.

Momik intends to rescue Grandfather Anshel too of course, only he doesn't quite know how yet. He's tried one or two methods already, but so far, nothing works. First, when Momik used to sit with Grandfather and give him his lunch, he would accidentally knock on the table sometimes the way Raphael Blitz and Nachman Farkash the convicts did when they were planning their prison break. He couldn't tell whether the knocking meant anything or not, but he had this hunch, this hope actually, that someone inside Grandfather would knock back. But nothing happened. Then Momik tried to figure out the secret code on Grandfather's arm. He'd tried this before with Papa's and Bella's and Aunt Idka's code numbers, but he didn't get anywhere that time either. The numbers drove him crazy because they weren't written in ink and they couldn't be washed off with water or spit. Momik tried everything to wash Grandfather's arm, but the number stayed fixed,

which gave Momik an idea that maybe the number wasn't written from the outside but from the inside, and that convinced him more than ever that there was somebody there inside Grandfather, and the others too maybe, which is how they call out for help, and Momik racked his brains to understand what it could be, and he wrote down Grandfather's number in his spy notebook next to Papa's and Bella's and Idka's, and did all kinds of calculations, and then luckily in school they learned about gematria and the numerical values of the alphabet which naturally Momik was the first in his class to understand, and when he got home he tried to turn the numbers into letters in different ways, but all he got was a bunch of strange words he didn't understand, and still Momik would not give up, and once in the middle of the night he had an Einsteiny idea, he remembered there are things called safes where rich people hide their money and diamonds, and these safe things will only open if you turn seven dials in a certain secret way, and you can bet Momik spent half the night experimenting, and the next day, as soon as he picked Grandfather up at the bench on his way home from school and gave him his lunch and sat down across the table from him, he called out various combinations of the numbers from Grandfather's arm in a slow, solemn voice. He sounded kind of like the guy on the radio who announces the numbers that won the thirty-thousand-pound prize in the lottery, and he had a peculiar feeling that any minute now his grandfather would split down the middle like a yellow string bean, and a smily little chick of a grandfather who loves children would pop out, only it didn't happen, and suddenly Momik felt strangely sad, and he got up and went over to old Grandfather, and hugged him tight, and felt how warm he was, like an oven, and Grandfather stopped talking to himself, and for maybe half a minute he was quiet, and kept his face and hands still, and sort of listened to what was going on inside, but he could never stop talking for very long.

Then Momik used his systematic approach, the kind he's really good at. Whenever he and Grandfather were left alone in the house together, Momik would start following him around with a notebook and pen, recording Grandfather's gibberish in Hebrew letters. Okay, he didn't write down every single word he said, not every single word, that would be too dumb, but he did write down what he thought were the most important sounds Grandfather made, and it only took a couple of days for Momik to notice that what Grandfather was saying wasn't all gib-

berish, in fact he was telling somebody a story, just as Momik had thought all along. Momik tried hard to remember what Grandma Henny used to tell him about Anshel (that was a long, long time ago, before Momik understood things like an alter kopf, before he ever heard about Over There), but all he could remember was that she said Grandfather wrote poems for grownups too, and that he had a wife and daughter who were killed Over There, and he also tried to find hints in the story from the old magazine, but he didn't come up with anything. Then Momik went to the school library and asked Mrs. Govrin the librarian if she had any books by a writer called Anshel Wasserman, and Mrs. Govrin peered at him over her glasses and said she never heard of him, and she knows everyone. Okay, so Momik didn't say anything, he just smiled to himself inside.

He went over to Bella's to share his discovery (that Grandfather was telling a story), but she only looked at him with that expression he doesn't like, pitying him and shaking her head from side to side and unbuttoning his top button, and she said, Sport, yingaleh, you're going to have to start pulling yourself together now, you're pale and scrawny, a real little fertel, how will they ever take you into the army, tell me, but Momik was stubborn and he explained that Grandfather Anshel was telling a story. Grandma Henny also used to like to tell stories when she still had her mind, and Momik remembered her special story voice and the way she stretched the words out and how her stomach filled with the words, and the peculiar way his palms would start sweating and the back of his knees, which is just how it felt when Grandfather talked now. And then he explained to Bella that he understood now that his poor grandfather was locked up in the story like the farmer with the sad face and the mouth open to scream that Aunt Idka and Uncle Shimmik brought from Switzerland, and this farmer lived his whole life in a glass ball where the snow fell if you shook it, and Mama and Papa put it on the living-room buffet, and Momik couldn't stand that mouth so one day he accidentally broke the glass and freed the farmer, and meanwhile Momik continues to record Grandfather's gibberish in the spy notebook slyly labeled *Geography*, and little by little he makes out a word here and there like Herrneigel, for instance, or Scheherazade, for instance, which he doesn't find in the *Hebrew Encyclopedia*, so he asks Bella for no particular reason what does Scheherazade mean, and Bella's just glad to hear he's stopped thinking about Over

There, and she says she'll ask her son Joshua, the major, and two days later she answers Momik that Scheherazade was an Arab princess who lived in Baghdad, which is a little strange since if you read the papers you know there isn't any princess in Baghdad, there's a prince, Prince Kassem, pshakrev, who hates us like all the goyim, may-their-memory-be-blotted-out, but Momik doesn't know the meaning of the word "surrender," he has the patience of an elephant, and he understands that a thing may seem mysterious and scary and confused today, but it will clear up by tomorrow, because it's just a question of logic, there's always an explanation, that's how it is in arithmetic, and that's how it is in everything else, but till the truth comes out, you just do things normally as if nothing happened, you go to school every morning and sit there for hours, and you don't let it hurt your feelings when the children say you walk like a camel, the way you slouch, oh, what do they know, and you don't feel bad when they call you Helen Keller because you wear glasses and have braces which is why he tries not to talk, and you don't give in when they try to butter you up so you'll tell them when the next surprise quiz in arithmetic will be, and on top of this Momik has to worry about the deal he made with Laizer the Crook who swipes his sandwich every morning and then there's the distance home from school every day which you use arithmetic to figure out, seven hundred and seventy-seven steps, no more, no less, from the school gate to the lottery booth where Mama and Papa sit squeezed together all day long not saying one word, and they see him turn the corner, all the way up the street, for this they possess animal instincts, and when he gets there Mama comes out with the house keys. Mama is very squatty, and looks something like a kilo bag of flour, and she wets her fingers with spit to comb the hair of Motl Ben Paisee the Chazzan, he should look tidy, and she wipes a speck of dirt off his cheek and his sleeve too, though Momik knows very well there isn't any dirt there, she just likes to touch him, and he, poor orphan, patiently faces her fingernails, gazing anxiously into her eyes, because if there's anything wrong with her eyes they won't grant us papers to get into America, and Mama, who doesn't know she's Motl's mother just now, says quickly under her breath, Your papa is becoming impossible, and she can't stand those krechtzes one more minute, like an old man ninety years old he sounds, and she swings around to look at Papa who just stares up in the air like there's nothing there and doesn't budge, and

Mama tells Momik Papa hasn't washed in a week, it's the way he stinks that keeps the customers away, no one's stopped at the booth for two days now except the three regulars, why should the lottery people let us keep the booth with no customers and where are we supposed to get money to eat I'd like to know, and the only reason she stays here with him all day long like a sardine is because you can't trust him with money, he might go off and sell the tickets at a discount, or he could get a heart attack from the hooligans, God forbid, why is God punishing me like this, let Him kill me right now instead of a little at a time, she says, and her face falls exhausted, but then she suddenly gazes at him, and for just a minute her eyes are pretty and young-looking, not frightened or angry, the opposite, you might say she seems to be trying out some new chendelach on Momik to make him smile, to make him special to her, and her eyes light up, but it only lasts about a half a minute and she changes back into the way she was before, and Momik sees her eyes change, and Motl whispers softly to her, in the voice of My Brother Elijah, Hush, nu, hush, Mama, weep no more, the doctor said it isn't good for you to cry, please, Mama, for our sake, and Momik makes a vow, tfu, may he die in Hitler's black tomb unless he finds a green stone that cures diseases of the eye and other cholerias, and this is what Momik is thinking so hard to help him not hear the seventh-grade hooligans shouting a safe distance away from big fat Papa: "Lottery little, lottery big, turns a pauper into a pig," a kind of ditty they made up, but Momik and Mama hear nothing, and Momik sees Papa, the sad giant of an Emperor, staring down at his enormous hands, no, all three of them are deaf to the hooligans, because they hear only their own secret language which is Yiddish, which soon the beautiful Marilyn Monroe will understand because she married Mr. Miller, a Jew, and every day she learns three new words, and these hooligans, let them drop dead, amen, and Mama touches Momik here and there while he says the magic word "Chaimova" seven times to himself, which is what you're supposed to say to infidels at the border tavern in the Motl Ben Paisee book, because when you say "Chaimova," they drop everything and obey you, especially if you ask them to help you cross the border to America, not to mention a simpler thing like handling a gang of seventh-graders whom Momik will only refrain from throwing to the infidels out of the goodness of his heart.

"There's a drumstick in the refrigerator for you and one for him,"

says Mama, "and be careful with the small bones, you shouldn't swallow any, God forbid, and he shouldn't either. Be careful." "Okay." "And be careful with the gas too, Shleimeleh, and blow the match out right away, so there won't be a fire, God forbid." "Okay." "And don't forget to make sure you turn off the gas knob when you're done, and the little tap behind the stove too. The one behind is the most important." "Yes." "And don't drink soda water out of the refrigerator. Yesterday I noticed at least one glass less in the bottle. You drank it, and it's winter now. And as soon as you're inside lock the door twice. The top lock and the bottom lock. Just once is no good." "Okay." "And make sure he goes to sleep as soon as lunch is over. Don't let him go out like a shlumper." "Okay." She carries on talking to herself a little longer, making sure with her tongue that there are no words left over, because if she's left out a single word, then everything she said will be wasted, but it's all right, there's nothing left out, nothing bad will happen to Momik, God forbid, so Mama can make her last speech, like this: "Don't open the door to anyone. We're not expecting company. And Papa and I will be home at seven as usual, don't worry. Do your homework. Don't turn the heater on even if it gets cold. You can play after you do your homework, but no wildness, and don't read too much, you'll ruin your eyes. And don't get into any fights. If anyone hits you, you come here to us right away." Her voice sounded weaker and farther away. "Good-bye, Shleimeleh, say goodbye to Papa. Goodbye, Shleimeleh. You be careful."

This must be how she bade him goodbye when he was a baby in the royal nursery. His father, who was still the Emperor and a commando fighter in those days, summoned the royal hunter and, with tear-choked voice, ordered him to take this infant deep into the forest and leave him there, prey to the birds of the sky, as they say. It was a kind of curse on children they had in those days. Momik didn't quite understand it yet. But anyway, luckily the royal hunter took pity on him and raised him secretly as his own, and many years later Momik returned to the castle as an unknown youth and became secret advisor to the Emperor and Empress, and that way, unbeknownst to anyone, he protected the poor Emperor and Empress who had banished him from their kingdom, and of course this is all imaginary, Momik is a truly scientific, arithmetically gifted boy, there's no one like him in fourth grade, but meanwhile, till the truth will out, Momik has to use imaginary things and

hints and hunches and the talking that stops the minute he walks into the room, that's how it was when Mama and Papa sat talking with Idka and Shimmik about the compensation money from Germany, and Papa said angrily, Take a man like me, for instance, who lost a child Over There, which is why Momik isn't so sure it's only imaginary, and sometimes when he's really feeling low, it makes him so happy just to think how glad they'll be the day he can finally tell Mama and Papa that he's the boy they gave away to the hunter, it will be exactly like Joseph and his brothers. But sometimes he imagines it a different way, that he's the boy who lost his twin brother, because Momik has this feeling that he used to have a Siamese twin, and when they were born, they were cut in two like in *Believe It or Not*: "300 astonishing cases that shook the world," and maybe someday they'll meet and be joined together again (if they want).

And from the lottery booth he makes his way home at a precise and scientific pace, they call it the camel walk because they don't understand that he's directing his footsteps through the secret passages and shortcuts only he knows, and there are some trees you have to brush against accidentally, because he has this feeling maybe there's somebody inside and you have to show him he hasn't been forgotten, and then he crosses the dump behind the deserted synagogue where old Munin lives all by himself and you have to hurry past on account of Munin but also on account of the saintly martyrs waiting there impatiently for someone to release them from holy extermination, and from here it's just ten steps to the gate of Momik's yard, and you can see the house already, a kind of concrete block perched on four wobbly legs, under which is a small cellar, they should have gotten only one apartment in the house actually, not two, but they signed Grandma Henny up as a separate family, like Uncle Shimmik told them to, and that's how they got the whole building to themselves, so even though nobody lives in the other half of the house or ever goes in there, it's theirs, they suffered enough Over There, and it's a mitzvah to cheat this government, cholera, and in the yard there's a big old pine tree that keeps out the sun and twice Papa went out with an ax to chop it down, but he scared himself each time and came back quietly, and Mama stormed at him because he had mercy on a tree but not on this child who was going to grow up in the dark without the vitamins you get from the sun, and Momik has a room all to himself, with a portrait of Prime Minister David Ben-

Gurion and a picture of Vultures with their wings spread like steel birds boldly defending our nation's skies, and it's too bad Mama and Papa won't let him hang any more pictures on the wall because it ruins the plaster, but except for the pictures, which really do ruin the plaster a little, his room is neat and tidy, everything in its place, and this room could definitely be a model for other children, if they would ever come over, that is.

It's a very quiet street, more like a lane really. There are only six houses on it, and it's always quiet, except when Hannah Zeitrin insults Our Lord. Momik's house is pretty quiet too. His mama and papa don't have many friends. In fact they don't have any friends at all except for Bella naturally, whom Mama goes to see on Saturday afternoons when Papa sits by the window in his undershirt and stares out, and except for Aunt Idka and Uncle Shimmik, who come twice a year for a whole week, and then everything changes. They're different from Mama and Papa. More like Bella really. And even though Idka has a number on her arm, they go to restaurants and to the theater and to Gigan and Schumacher, the comedians, and they laugh so hard, Mama glances sideways and kisses her fingertips and touches her forehead, and Idka says, What harm is there in a little laughter, Gisella, and Mama smiles a foolish smile like she's been caught and says, Don't mind me, laugh, laugh, there's no harm, I do it just to be safe. Idka and Shimmik play cards too and go to the seashore, and Shimmik even knows how to swim. Once they sailed on a luxury ship, *The Jerusalem*, for a whole month because Shimmik owns a big garage in Natanya, and also he knows how to cheat on his income tax really well, pshakrev, and there's only one small problem, which is that they don't have any children, because Idka did all sorts of scientific experiments Over There.

Momik's mama and papa never go away on trips, not even out of town, except once a year, a few days after Passover when they spend three days at a small pensione in Tiberias. This is sort of strange because they even take Momik out of school for the three days. In Tiberias they're different. Not so different, but a little different somehow. For instance, they sit at a café and order sodas and cake for three. One morning of the vacation they all go to the beach and sit under Mama's yellow umbrella which you could call a parasol, with everybody dressed very lightly. Then they rub Vaseline on their legs so they won't burn, and on their noses all three of them wear little white plastic shades.

Momik doesn't have a swimming suit, because it'd be silly to spend all that money on something you use only once a year and shorts are good enough. They allow him to run on the beach then as far as the water, and you can bet he knows things like the exact depth, length, and breadth of the Sea of Galilee, and what kinds of fish live in it better than any of those hooligans swimming out there. In the past when Momik and his parents went to Tiberias, Aunt Idka would come up to Jerusalem alone to take care of Grandma Henny. She always brought a stack of Polish newspapers with her from Natanya which she left with Bella when she went home. Momik used to clip out pictures of Polish soccer players from the newspapers (especially *Pshegeland*) like Shimkoviak, the fantastic goalkeeper with the catlike leaps, but the year Grandfather Anshel arrived, Idka didn't want to stay with him on her own because he's so difficult, so Mama and Papa went by themselves, and Momik stayed with his aunt and with Grandfather, because only Momik knows how to handle him.

That was the year he discovered his parents were running away from home and the city on account of Holocaust Day. He was already nine and a quarter by then. Bella used to call him the neighborhood miznik, but actually he was the only kid around. It had been that way since the day he arrived in his baby carriage, and the neighborhood women leaned over him and cooed, "Oy, Mrs. Neuman, vas far ein mieskeit," what an ugly thing, and the ones who knew better looked away and spat three times to save him from what they carry inside them like a disease, and for nine and a quarter years after that, every time he walked down the street he heard the same greeting and spitting, and Momik is always nice and well-mannered, because he knows what they think of the other children in the neighborhood, they're rude and wild and shvartzers, all of them, so you can see Momik has a lot of responsibility for the grownups on the street.

His full name, it should be mentioned, was Shlomo Efraim Neuman, in So-and-so's and So-and-so's memory. They'd have liked to give him a hundred names. Grandma Henny did it all the time. She would call him Mordechai Leibeleh, and Shepseleh and Mendel and Anshel and Shulam and Chumak, and Shlomo Haim, and that's how Momik got to know who they all were, Mendel who ran off to Russia to be a Communist nebuch, and disappeared, and Shulam the Yiddishist who sailed for America and the ship sank, and Isser who played the violin

and died with the Nazis, may-their-name-be-blotted-out, and tiny Leibeleh and Shepseleh there was no more room for at the table, the family was so big by then, and Grandma Henny's father told them to eat like the gentry, and they believed him and ate on the floor under the table, and Shlomo Haim grew up to be a sports champion and Anshel Efraim wrote the saddest, loveliest poems and then he went to live in Warsaw and became a Hebrew writer nebuch, and they all met their end with the Nazis, may-their-name-be-blotted-out, one fine day they closed in on the shtetl and gathered everyone together by the river—aiii, little Leibeleh and Shepseleh, forever laughing under the table, and Shlomo Haim who was half paralyzed and recovered by a miracle and became a Samson the Hero, forever flexing his muscles at the Jewish Olympics with the Prut River in the background, and little Anshel, the delicate one, they wondered how he would ever get through the winter, and they put hot bricks under his bed at night so he wouldn't freeze, there he sits in his sailor suit with his hair parted in the middle looking so serious with his big eyeglasses; Goodness me, Grandma clapped her hands, you look just like him. She told him all about them long long ago, in the days when she could still remember, and they thought he was too young to understand, but once when Mama saw that his eyes weren't staring blankly anymore, she told Grandma Henny to stop right away, and she also hid the book with the amazing pictures (she probably sent it to Aunt Idka). And now Momik is trying as hard as he can to remember what was in the pictures and the stories. He writes down every new thing he remembers, even the little things that don't seem important, because this is war, and in war we use everything we have. That's what the State of Israel does when it fights against the Arabs, pshakrev.

Bella helps him sometimes too, of course, but not so willingly, and the main part he has to do for himself. He isn't angry with her or anything, no, of course not, obviously anyone from Over There can't give him real clues, and they also can't ask him to help in a simple, straightforward way. It seems they have all these laws of secrecy in the kingdom. But hardships like these don't worry Momik, who has no choice, because he's got to take charge once and for all. And over the past few weeks an awful lot of crooked lines have gone into his spy notebook which he now writes in under the covers where he can't see. He isn't always exactly sure how you're supposed to write those words

in Hebrew that Papa screams out in his sleep every night. Anyway, Papa seemed to have calmed down a little and he'd stopped with the nightmares for a while till Grandfather arrived and then everything started up again. The screaming is certainly weird, but what do we have logic and brains and Bella for? When we examine the screaming in the light of day, it turns out to be quite simple. It was like this, there was a war in that kingdom, and Papa was the Emperor and also the chief warrior, a commando fighter. One of his friends (his lieutenant?) was called Sondar. This strange name may have been his name in the underground, like in the days of the Etzel and Lehi. They all lived in a big camp with a complicated name. There they were trained to go on daring missions, which were so secret even today you have to keep mum about them. Also there were some trains around, but that part isn't so clear. Maybe those trains are like the ones his secret brother Bill tells him about, the trains attacked by savage Indians. Everything is so mixed up. And there were also these big campaigns in Papa's kingdom called Aktions, and sometimes (probably to make the people feel proud) they would have really incredible parades, like we have on Independence Day. Left, right, left, right, Papa screams in his sleep, Links recht, he screams in the German language Bella will positively not translate for Momik, till he practically shouts at her and she gets angry and tells him it means left, right, to the left, to the right. Is that it, Momik wonders, then why didn't she want to translate it? Mama wakes up at night from Papa's screaming and she pokes him and shakes him, and cries, Nu, Tuvia, sha, be still, the child can hear you, Over There is gone, it's the middle of the night, a klag zal im trefin, you'll wake the boy, Tuvia! And then Papa wakes up scared and starts with the big krechtes that sound like a frying pan sizzling under the faucet, and Momik in his room meanwhile has shut the notebook under the covers, but he still hears Papa sort of sighing into his hands, and now he thinks carefully, the way Amos Chacham does before answering a very interesting question, Supposing Papa touched his eyes and went on seeing as usual, would that mean that the death in his hands is gone?

Well, he must touch Mama sometimes when they're jammed together in the lottery booth. And he always used to lift Grandma Henny in his arms and carry her to the table and back to bed again. And every Thursday he bathes Grandfather Anshel with a washrag and a little basin, because Mama is disgusted.

Okay, okay, they're from Over There, so maybe that's why he can't hurt them. But here's one important thing to think about: when he's selling tickets in the lottery booth he wears little rubber thimble things on each finger!

Not to mention the most conclusive scientific evidence of all, the thing that happened with the leeches the time Madame Miranda Bardugo came to cure Papa when he had eczema all over his hands. Momik has worked out various theories like a serious investigator: a boiling kettle? To look at them, if you didn't know, you'd think they were just ordinary hands. Or sandpaper maybe? Porcupine quills? Momik was having a hard time falling asleep. For a long time now, ever since Grandfather Anshel showed up, he hadn't been able to fall asleep at night. Dry ice? A needle?

In the morning, before breakfast (Mama and Papa always leave first), he quickly jots down another guess: "Boldly charging from the camp, our valiant heroes surprised the savage Indians with Red Slipper, who had attacked the mail train. The Emperor galloped ahead on his faithful steed, bursting with splendor, also shooting his rifle in every direction. Sondar of the Commandos covered him from behind. The mighty Emperor shouted to me, his bold roar resounding through the frozen kingdom." Momik paused to read what he had written so far. This was definitely an improvement over what usually came out. But it still wasn't good enough. So much was missing. The main thing was missing, he felt sometimes. But what was this main thing? No, the writing should have more power, more biblical splendor, like Grandfather Anshel's writing. Only how? He would have to be bolder. Because whatever it was that happened Over There must have really been something for everyone to try so hard not to talk about it. Momik also started including some things they were learning about in school just then, like Orde Wingate and the Night Platoons, and also the Super Mystère jets we'll soon have, God willing, from our friends and eternal allies the French, and he even used the first Israeli nuclear reactor currently under construction in the sands of Nahal Rubin, and in next week's issue, a sensation-something article with exclusive photographs of the pool where they actually do the atomic thing! Momik felt he was getting closer to solving the riddle. (Momik always remembered what Sherlock Holmes said in "The Adventure of the Dancing Men," that what one man invents another can discover, so he's sure he will succeed.) It's a

fight for his parents and for the others too. Of course they know nothing about it, why should they know. He's fighting like a partisan. Undercover. All alone. So that they'll finally be able to forget and relax a little, and stop being so scared for once in their lives. He's found a way. It is dangerous, to tell the truth, but Momik isn't scared. That is, he's scared, but there's just no other way. Bella unknowingly gave him the biggest clue of all when she mentioned the Nazi Beast. That was a very long time ago though, and he hadn't quite understood it then, but the day Grandfather arrived and Momik went down to the cellar to look for the sacred old magazine with his story in it, he understood exactly. And in a way that was when Momik made up his mind to find the Beast and tame it and make it good, and persuade it to change its ways and stop torturing people and get it to tell him what happened Over There and what it did to those people, and it's been about a month now, almost a whole month since Grandfather Anshel arrived that Momik has been busy up to his ears, in complete secrecy, down in the small dark cellar under the house, raising the Nazi Beast.

That was a winter they would remember for years. Not because of the rain, it didn't rain in the beginning, but because of the wind. The winter of '59, said the old people of Beit Mazmil, and no one had to say any more. Momik's father walked around the house at night with yellow gatkes showing under his trousers, and a big wad of cotton in each ear, and he would stuff pieces of torn-up newspaper into the keyholes to stop the wind from getting in (which could get in even through there). At night Mama worked on the sewing machine Shim-mik and Idka gave her. Bella fixed it so lots of ladies would bring Mama their quilt covers to mend and their old sheets to patch up and she could earn a little extra for the house. It was a secondhand Singer sewing machine, and when Mama sat working at it and the wheel turned and creaked, Momik felt as if she were controlling the weather outside. The noise from the machine made Papa jumpy, but he didn't say anything, because he also needed the little extra, and besides he didn't want to get into trouble with Mama and her mouth, so he would pace around the house, krechting and switching the radio on and off, saying, This wind and all the other troubles are from the government, cholera. He always voted for the Orthodox Party, not because he was Orthodox, he wasn't one bit, but because he hated Ben-Gurion for being in power, and the General Zionists for being in the Opposition, and Ya'ari for

being a Communist, pshakrev. And the winter with the winds and the drought began when the Orthodox Party left the Coalition, which is a sign from God that He is not pleased with the way things are going around here, Papa said, with a brave and careful look at Mama, who just kept sewing and said to herself out loud, Oich mir a politikacker—Dag Hammarskjöld.

But Momik was pretty worried, because he noticed that the whistling winds were confusing the people he'd become friendly with lately, and he had this feeling, not that he believed it could actually happen, but things were sure weird and a little scary too. Mrs. Hannah Zeitrin for instance. She got another installment of her compensation for the tailor shop her family used to own in Danzig, but instead of spending it on food or stuffing it into an old shoe in the storeroom, she went out and bought herself new clothes, aza yar oif mir, may such a year befall me, and the wardrobe of that woman, says Mama to Bella, her eyes burning with rage, the way she wiggles like a boat, the slut, what did she lose out in the street? And Bella, who is pure gold, and who gives even Hannah a free glass of tea, just laughs and says, What do you care, Gisella, tell me, did you give birth to her at the age of seventy that you should worry so much about her? You know why a woman buys herself a fur coat, don't you, she wants to keep herself warm and the neighbors boiling. And Momik listens and sees that Bella and Mama don't understand, Hannah just wants to look beautiful, that's all, not to make Mama mad, and not even for mating, but because she has a new idea which only Momik knows about from listening to her when she talks to herself and scratches on the bench with the old people. But Hannah Zeitrin isn't the only one around here who's overdoing it lately. Mr. Munin is acting stranger than ever. Actually, with Munin it started even before Grandfather arrived, but now he's really gone too far. Sometime around the beginning of the year, Mr. Munin heard that the Russians sent Lunik I to the moon, and he started to be very interested in space things and became so impatient he made Momik come and tell him anything new he heard about Sputniks, right away, and even promised to pay Momik two piasters for listening to *New World of Science* on the radio Saturday mornings, and for bringing him a report on everything they say about Our Friend, that's what he calls Lunik I, as if they know each other. So on Saturday morning after the program Momik runs outside and crawls through the hole in the fence to the back yard of

the deserted synagogue where Mr. Munin lives as caretaker. Straight-away he tells him everything they said on the program, and Munin gives him a note on which he wrote in advance on Friday: "In exchange for this note I will pay bearer the sum of 2 (two) piasters after the Holy Sabbath." The deal has been working out pretty well for a couple of weeks now. When Momik brings really good news about space and the latest discoveries, Munin is very happy. He bends down and draws the moon like a round ball in the dirt with a stick, and beside it all nine planets whose names he knows by heart, and next to that, proud as a baleboos, he draws a picture of his friend, Lunik 1, who didn't quite make it to the moon and so became, nebuch, planet number ten. Munin is very knowledgeable, and he explains all about rockets and jet propulsion, and about an inventor called Zaliukov Munin wrote to once about an idea that could get him the Nobel Prize, but then the war broke out and everything went kaput, and the time is not yet ripe to discuss this but someday the whole world will understand who Munin is, and then they'll envy him, oh yes, that's all they'll be able to do, because they will never know what the good life is, the true life, true happiness, yes, he isn't ashamed to say it, the word is happiness, Momo, happiness, it must exist somewhere, right? Ah, nu, here I go, talking your head off. He drew in the dust as he talked, and Momik stood by, not understanding any of this, facing the bald spot with the dirty black yarmulke on it, and the two pairs of glasses tied together with a yellow rubber band, and the long white whiskers on his cheeks. Munin almost always had an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips that had a strange, sharp smell, not like anything he'd ever smelled before, kind of like the smell of carobs on a tree, and in a way Momik does enjoy standing close to Munin and smelling that smell, and Munin doesn't mind too much either. And once when the Americans launched Pioneer 4 and Momik went over before school to tell Munin, he found him sitting in the sun as usual, on an old car seat, warming himself like a cat, and beside him, on an old newspaper, were pieces of wet bread for the birds he always feeds, and the birds know him now and they fly around with him wherever he goes, and Mr. Munin had just been reading a holy book with a picture of a naked prophetess on the cover, and it seemed to Momik he'd seen that book somewhere before maybe at Lipschitz's in the shopping center, but how could that be, Mr. Munin wouldn't be interested in things like that, Momik knows the kind of ladies he looks for in the ads. Munin quickly hid the book away and said, Nu,

Momo, what news dost thou bring? (he always talks like that, in the language of Our Sages of Blessed Memory), and Momik tells him about Pioneer 4 and Munin jumps up from the car seat and lifts Momik high in the air, and hugs him with all his might, to his prickly whiskers, and his coat and the stink, and he dances wildly all around the yard, a strange and frightening dance under the sky and the treetops and the sun, and Momik is afraid that someone passing by will see him like this, and Munin's two black coattails fly up in the air behind him, and he doesn't let Momik down until he's all worn out, and then he takes a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and looks around to see if anyone's watching, and then he crooks his finger for Momik to come closer, and Momik who's still pretty dizzy comes closer and sees it's a kind of map with names written on it in a language he doesn't understand and a lot of little Mogen Davids everywhere, and Munin whispers in his face, "The Lord redeemeth in the twinkling of an eye, and the sons of light soar high," and then he imitates a flying leap with his big hand and says, "Feeeeiiww!!" so loud and furiously that Momik who is still dizzy trips over a stone and falls down, and that's when Momik with his very own eyes saw stinky black hilarious Munin taking off diagonally in a strong wind to the sky like the Prophet Elijah in his chariot maybe, and at that moment, a moment he would never-ever-black-and-blue forget, he understood at long last that Munin was actually a kind of secret magician like the Lamed Vavim, the way Hannah Zeitrin isn't just a woman but a witch too, and Grandfather Anshel is a kind of prophet in reverse who tells what used to be, and maybe Max and Moritz and Mr. Marcus are also playing secret roles and they aren't just here by chance, they're here to help Momik, because before he started fighting for his parents and raising the Nazi Beast, he rarely even noticed them. Okay, maybe he noticed them, but he never used to talk to any of them before except Munin, and he always tried to keep as far away from them as possible, and now he hangs around with them all the time, and when he isn't hanging around with them he's thinking about them and what they say about Over There, and what a dope he was not to understand it before, and the truth is, he did use to sort of make fun of them sometimes because of how they look and stink and things like that, but now Momik hopes for one thing only, that they'll pass him all their secret clues so he'll be able to figure them out before this crazy wind gets them.

And at noon when Momik and Grandfather walk home . . . then there

have to lean so far against the wind they can hardly see the way, and they're afraid because they hear weird noises that sound like many tongues and Momik is sure there's something hiding inside the tree and in the pavement cracks, that it was probably there for ages till the wind blew it out, and Momik digs deeper in his pockets, and he's sorry now he didn't eat more last summer and put on a little weight, and Grandfather uses his crazy movements to cut through the wind, only suddenly he forgets where he's going, and he stops and looks around, and holds his hands up like a baby waiting for someone to pick him up, and this could turn into something dangerous because what if the wind grabbed him just then, but thank goodness Momik has Chodorov instincts and he always gets there just in time to catch Grandfather and to squeeze his hand, which is so soft on the inside, and they walk on together, and by then you can tell the wind is absolutely furious and it pounces on them out of the Ein Kerem Valley and the Malcha Valley, and sails wet newspapers at their faces and old campaign posters from the walls, and the wind howls like a jackal, and the cypress trees go stark raving mad from the howling, and they bow and writhe as if somebody were tickling their bellies, and it takes Momik and Grandfather forever to get home, and Momik finally unlocks the two locks and locks the bottom lock again right away, and only then does the wind stop howling in their ears, and they can start to hear something.

Now Momik can throw his schoolbag down and help Grandfather off with Papa's big, old overcoat, and sniff him quickly and sit him down at the table, and warm up the food for both of them. Grandma Henny used to have lunch in her room because she couldn't get out of bed without help, but Grandfather keeps him company, which is nice, like having a real grandfather you can talk to and all that.

Momik loved Grandma Henny very much. To this day it makes his heart ache to think of her. And all the suffering she suffered when she died too. But anyway, Grandma Henny had a special language she used when she was seventy-nine after she forgot her Polish and Yiddish and the little bit of Hebrew she learned here. When Momik came home from school he used to run in to see how she was, and she would get all excited and turn red and talk in that language of hers. Momik would bring her food in and sit down to look at her. She pecked at her plate like a bird. She had a permanent smile on her little face, a kind of faraway smile, and she talked to him through her smile. It usually started

with her getting angry at him, Mendel, for leaving the family like that and going to do poor people's work in a place called Borislav, and from there he wandered off to Russia where he vanished, how could you do such a thing and break our mother's heart, and then she begs him, Sholem, never, ever, even when he reaches America where the streets are paved with gold, to forget that he's a Jew, and to wear tefillin and pray in the synagogue, and then she would ask him, Isser, to play "Sheraleh" on the violin, and she would close her eyes and you could tell she actually heard that violin, yes, and Momik watched not daring to disturb her. This was better and more exciting than any movie or book, and sometimes he had real tears in his eyes, and Mama and Papa asked what he liked about sitting with Grandma Henny in her room so long, listening to her talk that language no one understands, and Momik said he understood everything. That was a fact. Because Momik has this gift, a gift for all kinds of languages no one understands, he can even understand the silent kind that people who say maybe three words in their whole life talk, like Ginzburg who says, Who am I who am I, and Momik understands that he's lost his memory and that now he's looking for who he is everywhere even in the garbage cans, and Momik has decided to suggest (they've been spending a lot of time on the bench together lately) that he should send a letter to the radio program *Greetings from New Immigrants*, and maybe someone would recognize him and remind him who he is and where he got lost, oh yes, Momik can translate just about anything. He is the translator of the royal realm. He can even translate nothing into something. Okay, that's because he knows there's no such thing as nothing, there must be something, nu, that's exactly how it is with Grandfather Anshel, who also eats like a bird, peck and gulp, only slightly more frightenedly than Grandma Henny, probably because they had to eat very very fast Over There like the Jews in Egypt on the eve of Passover. And Momik has also finally managed to crack Grandfather's code, and he knows now that Grandfather is telling the story to a man or boy by the name of Herrnigel, and he calls his name in different ways, sometimes angrily, sometimes flatteringly, or sometimes a little sadly, but three days ago while Momik was listening to Grandfather talk to himself in his room, he distinctly heard him say "Fried," and Momik had come across that name before in the sacred magazine, and his hands started to tremble with excitement, but he told himself, Look, those are old stories, why

would Grandfather tell the same stories over and over and get all excited like that? But naturally he had to check it out now, so when he brought Grandfather home from the green bench and sat him down at the table, he blurted out, "Fried! Paula! Otto! Harotian!" Okay, that was pretty risky, and suddenly he had a feeling Grandfather might do something bad to him. He did give him a very spooky look as a matter of fact, but he didn't do anything, and after sitting still for almost a whole minute, Grandfather said softly and very clearly, "Herrneigel," pointing back over his shoulder with his crooked thumb, as if there were some big or little Herrneigel standing behind him, and then he whispered, "Nazikaput!" but suddenly he smiled a real smile at Momik, the smile of a person who understands, and he leaned over his plate till his face was very close to Momik's and said, "Kazik," kind of gently, as if he had a present to give him, and he formed a little man with his hands, a dwarf or baby or something, and rocked it to his heart the way you rock a baby, and the whole time he kept smiling that sweet smile at Momik, and suddenly Momik saw that Grandfather did resemble Grandma Henny, which is no wonder since they were brother and sister, but then Grandfather's face closed up again, as if someone inside ordered him to stop everything on the outside and come back as quickly as possible because there's no time, and then the mumbling started again with the stupid tunes and the jerky movements and the white spit squirting out of the sides of his mouth, and Momik leaned back, very proud of his commando invasion into the heart of Grandfather's story, like a real Captain Meir Har-Zion alter kopf, and although maybe he didn't know a whole lot just yet, he was absolutely positive that Grandfather Anshel and this Herrneigel had something to do with the war Momik had been waging for a while against the Nazi Beast, and that even though Grandfather came from Over There, maybe he refused to stop fighting, maybe he was the only one from Over There who wouldn't surrender, and that's why he and Momik have a secret pact.

And Momik just sat there looking at Grandfather, his eyes filled with admiration, and now Grandfather seemed to him exactly like an ancient prophet, Isaiah or Moses, and suddenly he realized that all his past plans about what to be when he grew up had been one big mistake, that there was only one thing worth being in life and that's a writer, like Grandfather Anshel, and the thought puffed him up so much that he almost started flying around the room like a balloon, which is why

he had to dash to the toilet, but this time it was different, he didn't have to pee after all, and in bewilderment he ran to his room and pulled out his secret notebook, which is also his diary and a truly scientific catalogue of things from Over There, the emperors and kings, the soldiers and the Yiddishists and the athletes from the Jewish Olympics, and the stamps and currency, and precise drawings of all plants and animals, and across the page in great big letters he wrote **IMPORTANT DECISION!!!**, and under this heading he wrote the important decision, which was to become a writer like Grandfather, and then he looked at the writing and saw how good it looked, much better than it usually came out, and now he wanted to find a really terrific finish to match his great decision, and thought of writing "Chazak Chazak Venitchazek" like it says when you come to the end of a book in the Holy Bible, but his hand took over and boldly scrawled sportscaster Nechemia Ben-Avraham's heroic battle cry, "Our boys will do or die!" and no sooner had he written these words than he was filled with a sense of duty and maturity too, and he walked back to the kitchen, slowly and responsibly, and gently wiped the drumstick grease from Grandfather's chin, and led him by the hand to his room, and helped him undress, and caught a peek of his thingy though he tried to look away, and then he went back to the kitchen muttering, No time, no time.

First he switched on the big radio with the glass panel showing the names of capital cities around the world, and he waited for the green eye to warm up; it looked as if he had already missed the beginning of *Greetings from New Immigrants and Locating Lost Relations*, and he did hope none of his names had been called out meanwhile. He picked up the list Papa wrote in big letters like a first-grader, and lip-read together with the radio announcing that Rochaleh, daughter of Paula and Abraham Seligson from Phashmishul, is trying to locate her little sister Lealeh who lived in Warsaw between the years . . . Eliahu Frumkin, son of Yocheved and Herschel Frumkin from Stri, is trying to locate his wife Elisheva née Eichler and his two sons Jacob and Meir . . . Momik doesn't even have to glance at the paper to check, he knows his names by heart. Mrs. Esther Neuman née Shapira, and the child, Mordechai Neuman, and Zvi Hirsch Neuman, and Sarah-Bella Neuman, a lot of lost Neumans wandering around Over There, and Momik is only half listening now, pronouncing the names like the woman on the radio, in a sad singsong that sort of sinks into despair which he has been

listening to every lunchtime since he first learned how to read and they gave him the list with the names, Yizhak son of Avraham Neuman, and Arie Leib Neuman, and Gitel daughter of Hirschel Neuman, all the Neumans, Papa's family, very, very distantly related, he's been told so many times, and he traces circles on the paper which is stained with the grease of a thousand lunches, and in each circle there's a name, but suddenly Momik notices that this is like the singsong of the old people telling their stories about Over There.

It's 1:30 now, time to get going. He wipes the table meticulously, and washes the dishes in his own special way (soap, rinse, soap and rinse again) till the forks and plates glisten and give him naches, because he can't stand dirty silverware lying in the sink, as they very well know, and then he puts the quarter of a chicken he didn't touch into a brown paper bag and looks through the refrigerator to see what he can take for the Beast. He pokes around the bottles of medicines old and new, and the jars of red horseradish and the plate of jellied calf's leg left over from the Sabbath among the pots full of food for the big supper that lies ahead, and for the thousandth time he peers behind the bottle of rosé wine they got as a present a few years ago from the anonymous person who bought a lottery ticket from their booth and won a thousand pounds, the biggest prize anyone ever won from them, and Momik printed on a piece of cardboard: *From this booth, ticket number such and such won 1,000 pounds*, and the man was a mensh and came around to say thank you and brought the bottle of wine with him, that was really nice, but nobody around here drinks crap like that, still it isn't nice to throw it away, and Momik took out the jar of yogurt (he could always tell Mama he ate it), and a cucumber and an egg, and after listening behind Grandfather's door to make sure he was asleep or talking to himself as usual, Momik went outside and locked the door behind him, the bottom lock too, and he ran down the steps under the wobbly concrete pillars, right into the wind, and forced the creaky cellar door open with all his might, and breathing hard, now or never, he walked in, and his face and back broke out in a cold sweat, and he stood there leaning heavily against the wall with his fist between his teeth to keep from screaming, but inwardly he was screaming, Get out get out get out or it will eat you up, but he doesn't, he mustn't, this is war, and it's stuffy and it stinks in there, like must and mildew, and animals and animal doo-doo, and there are weird noises in the dark, rasping

and sputtering and cooing, and a big claw scraping the cage, and a wing spreading slowly, and a beak snapping open and shut somewhere, Get out get out, but he doesn't, and one spot of light breaks through the tiny window also covered with cardboard, and this light helps his eyes get used to the dark little by little, and even then he can hardly see the wooden crates lined up against the wall; not all of them are full yet actually, because the hunt is still on.

So far so good though. He's had some great catches. A big hedgehog he found in the back yard with a pointy black face, sad-looking like a little person, and there's a turtle he found down in Ein Kerem that's still in hibernation, and there's a toad that wanted to cross the road but Momik saved its life and brought it down here, and a lizard that unhitched its tail the instant Momik caught it, but Momik couldn't resist so he scooped up the tail with a piece of paper (it was pretty disgusting) and put the tail in a separate cage with a sign saying: *As yet unfamiliar animal. May be venomous*. But then he had a scientific conscience about it and added a correction that looked more honest: *Tail may be venomous*, because you never can tell. And there was also a kitten that most likely went crazy in the dark cage, and then—this is what you could call the crowning touch of the collection—there was the young raven that fell out of its nest in the pine tree kerplunk onto the little balcony. The young raven's parents are very suspicious of Momik, and they swoop down at him whenever they see him in the yard; a few weeks ago they even pecked his back and his arm and there was blood and a big commotion, but they can't prove anything, and the young raven gets the drumstick every day and tears it to pieces with its claws and crooked beak, and Momik watches it and thinks, How cruel, maybe this is the Beast, but you can't really tell who it's going to come out of in the end, and we won't know till they all get the right kind of nourishment and care.

A few days ago he saw a gazelle. He saw her on his way down the Ein Kerem path, a light brown patch on the rocks sweeping by suddenly. She stopped in her tracks and turned toward him looking beautiful and frightened and wild. A gazelle. She stretched forward to sniff him, and Momik held his breath. He wanted a good smell to come out of him, a friendly smell. She raised one hoof off the ground and checked the smell. Then she jumped back and stared at him with wide-open eyes, not lovingly, she was afraid of him and she ran away. Momik searched

the rocks for about an hour, but he didn't find her. He was angry and he couldn't understand why. He asked himself if she might have the Beast in her too, because Bella said it could come out of any animal. Any animal? He'd better check with Bella again.

Momik took crates labeled TNUVA PRODUCE and REFRESHING TEMPO SODA from behind Bella's grocery store. He padded them with rags and old newspapers, and made little locks for them out of wire. He lugged all the stuff in the cellar off to one side, Grandma Henny's kifat, the big Jewish Agency beds, the straw mattresses that stank of pee, and the suitcases practically bursting with shmattes that were tied up with rope to keep them from springing open, and two big sacks full of shoes, because you never throw out old shoes, as anyone who's ever walked barefoot for twenty kilometers in the snow can tell you, Papa said, which was about the only clue he ever got from Papa, and he wrote it down right away. The snow did pretty much fit in with that business about the Snow Queen who freezes everybody. And from the kitchen cupboard he stole a couple of old plates and half-broken cups for the food in the cages, and Mama noticed right away of course, and he screamed that he didn't do it, and he saw she didn't believe him, and he threw himself on the floor, kicking and pounding, and he even said something mean—that she should leave him alone already and stop butting into his business, which he never said before he started fighting the Beast, not to her or to anyone, and Mama was really frightened, and she shut up, and her hand trembled over her mouth, and her eyes popped open so wide he was afraid they would burst, okay, so what could he do, the words came out. He never guessed he had words like that inside him. But she shouldn't have made such a big fuss about it. Maybe they can't help because they aren't allowed to, okay, but do they have to butt in?

After that he stopped taking things from the house. It's risky to take anything because Mama has eyes in the back of her head, and she even sleeps with her eyes open, and she can always tell what he's thinking, that's happened several times. She knows about everything in the house. When she's drying the forks and soup spoons and knives after supper, she counts them quietly, humming a kind of tune. She knows how many tassels there are on the living-room carpet, and she always but always knows exactly what time it is, even when she doesn't have her watch on. Prophecy must run in the family, because it seems to have

started with Grandfather Anshel and passed down to Mama and now Momik. The way diseases pass down.

And another thing worth mentioning is that Momik never slouches on the prophecy job, and he always tries to be a genius like Shaya Weintraub who calculated the minutes till Passover, and for the past few days Momik has been experimenting with numbers, not something really big, but fairly interesting all the same—it goes like this: he counts the number of letters in words people say on his fingers, and it could be that Momik Neuman of Beit Mazmil, Jerusalem, is the inventor of a spectacular new method of counting on your fingers, faster than a robot, and no one could ever guess how it works, because it looks as if Momik is just listening to what the person is saying, his teacher for instance, or Mama for instance, but in his head and on his fingers something else is going on. Not every word though, every word, what, is he crazy? Only words with a certain ring to them, if he hears that kind of word, his fingers start running up and down as if they were playing the piano, and they count at Super Mystère speed as if they were jet-propelled and could break the sound barrier. For instance, if someone says the word “infiltrators” on the radio, right away his fingers start running automatically, and he makes a fist which means five fingers and another fist which means five fingers and another two fingers which makes twelve letters all together. Or “national league coach,” and the fingers calculate it right away, nineteen letters, or how about the magic word “uranium” which is the most important element in the atomic reactor, bzzzz! One fist, two fingers, that's seven letters altogether. And Momik's had so much practice now that he can calculate whole sentences on his fingers, especially juicy ones like “Our forces returned safely,” four fists, three fingers; it's really fun too, a very interesting, quiet game, and it also strengthens your hand and finger muscles, which is important because Momik's a little on the short side, and even skinnier than he is short, but—(1) short people can be strong, look at Ernie Tyler who's a dwarf (a midget, that is) and he saved Manchester United, and this year they traded him off again to save Sunderland, and (2) with the help of finger exercises and willpower like Raphael Halperin, Momik may soon become stronger, God willing, than the famous Jewish wrestler Over There, the one and only Zisha Breitbart, feared even by the goyim, may-their-name-be-blotted-out, which must be what they call a deterrent, one fist, four fingers, and by the way, according to the rules

of Momik's new game, a word that ends with the middle finger is a word that brings good luck, and that's why he sometimes adds on a "the" to a word to make it come out on the middle finger. Why not? You're allowed to use strategy. In war you have to use strategy.

He waits in the cellar a little while longer. Maybe it's not long enough for the Beast, but it's still pretty hard to stay down there the way you really have to if you want to make it come out. But then he has to go so bad he wets his pants like a baby, and runs home to change. He still hasn't found a way to keep it from happening. The raven flutters its black wings—and before you know it, his pants are wet. And his undershirt is damp too, and it stinks like sweat after two hours of gym class, and meanwhile the cat is yowling, and Momik's eyes are half closed. The first night they could hear the cat all the way up in the house, and Papa wanted to go look for it down there and throw it to the devil, but Mama wouldn't let him go out by himself in the dark, and they just got used to it eventually and didn't even hear it anymore, and pretty soon the yowling got softer, as if it was coming from the cat's stomach. Momik does feel kind of bad about that cat, and he even considered setting it free, only the trouble is, Momik is scared of opening the cage door because the cat might spring at him, so the cat stays, but Momik feels more like the cat's prisoner than the other way around.

So he forces himself to stand there with his eyes shut, his body tense with battle alert, two fists, one finger, in case, God forbid, something happens, and the raven and the cat are watching and all of a sudden the raven opens its beak and makes a terrible croaking sound, and in less than no time Momik finds himself outside with his leg wet all the way down.

And then he runs upstairs and opens the door and locks the bottom lock too and shouts, "Grandfather, I'm here," and changes his pants and washes the disgusting pee from his leg, and sits down to do his homework, but first he has to wait till his hands stop shaking. Okay. Now he can draw an equilateral triangle and answer the who-said-what-to-whom questions in the Bible homework, and things like that. This he finishes pretty fast, because homework is never a problem for Momik, and he also hates to put off doing homework so he does it the same day, because why should he let it burden his mind? Then he sits down and times his breathing with his watch (a real watch that used to belong to Shimmik), and he practices so that someday he'll be able to enter a

contest and sing in one breath against Lee Gaines, the Negro singer from the Delta Rhythm Boys, who are currently performing in our country bringing us their new kind of music called jazz, and just then he remembers that he forgot as usual to ask Bella for a recipe for sugar cubes to give to Blacky, the horse that belongs to his secret brother Bill, and he decides to do the homework his science teacher is going to assign three lessons from now, the questions are at the back of each chapter and he likes to be three chapters ahead, too bad he can't do that in the other subjects, and he finishes his homework now and wanders around the house, has he forgotten anything, yes: what do you feed baby hedgehogs, because the hedgehog seems to be getting fatter so maybe it's a female and you have to be prepared, because the Beast can come from anywhere.

He ran his fingers over the large volumes of the *Hebrew Encyclopedia* Papa subscribed to with the special discount offer and installment payments for employees of the National Lottery. These were the only books they bought, you can always find books to read in the library. Momik wants to save up his money to buy some books, but books are very expensive and Mama won't allow him to buy any, even with his own money. She says books attract dust. But Momik simply must have books, and when there's enough money saved up in his hiding place from presents and what he gets from Mr. Munin sometimes, he hurries down to Lipschitz's to buy a book, and on the way home he writes in the jacket in deliberately crooked handwriting: *To my good friend Momik, from Uri*, or in big, grown-up-looking letters like Mrs. Govrin's he writes: *Property of Beit Mazmil Elementary School*. This way, if Mama should ever happen to notice a new book with his school things, Momik has a cover. But the *Encyclopedia* was no use this time, because they weren't up to P for pregnancy yet, and there was nothing under Cubs either. There seemed to be an awful lot of things the *Encyclopedia* was trying to ignore, as if they didn't exist, some of the most interesting things of all in fact, like the thing Mr. Munin has been talking about more and more lately, "Happiness," the *Encyclopedia* doesn't even mention it, or maybe there's some good reason for this because usually it's very very smart. Momik loves to hold the big books in his hands, and it makes him feel good all over to run his fingers down the smooth pages that seem to have a protective covering that keeps your fingers away, so you won't get too close, because who are you, what are you

compared to the *Encyclopedia*, with all the little letters crowded in long, straight columns and mysterious abbreviations like secret signals for a big, strong, silent army boldly marching out to conquer the world, all-knowing, all-righteous, and a couple of months ago Momik vowed he would read an entry a day in alphabetical order, because he's a very methodical little boy, and so far he hasn't missed once, except for the time Grandfather Anshel arrived, so the next day to make up for it he read two entries, and even though he doesn't always understand what they're talking about, he likes to touch the pages and feel deep in his stomach and his heart all the power and the silence, and the seriousness, and the scientificness that makes everything so clear and simple, and best of all he likes Volume VI, which is all about Israel, and from the cover you might think it was an ordinary volume like the others, because it looks serious and smart and scientific, but in this volume, right before the end, you suddenly see a burst of fantastic colors, two fantastic whole pages of pictures of all the stamps issued by the State of Israel, and Momik gasps when he turns the pages in this volume slowly and all the beautiful colors leap out at him and take him completely by surprise like huge bouquets of flowers or a peacock's tail fanning out in his face and all those pictures and colors and the wildness of it, and the one thing that reminds him a little of this is the red lining that looks like fire in Mama's black evening bag.

And another secret which can be told now is that those were the stamps that gave Momik the idea of drawing his stamps from Over There. In the past few days, thanks to everything the old people have been teaching him about Over There, he managed to fill nearly a whole album. Once, he had to make do with what he knew already, which wasn't that much, and which wasn't that interesting either, why not admit it; for instance, he used to draw Papa the way they draw Chaim Weizmann our first President on a blue three-piaster stamp, and he drew Mama holding a peace dove, one fist, four fingers, wearing a white dress as in the 1952 Holiday Greetings stamp, and Bella as Baron Edmond de Rothschild, she's a famous philanthropist too, with a bunch of grapes on one side, just like the real stamp. There didn't use to be that much to draw before, but now everything has changed. Momik draws lots of stamps with Grandfather Anshel as Dr. Herzl, Seer of the Nation at the Twenty-third Zionist Congress (because Grandfather Wasserman is a seer and a prophet like that), and little Aaron Marcus

as Maimonides with the beads and the funny hat on the brown stamp, and Max and Moritz like the two people carrying the pole of grapes on their shoulders, Ginzburg in front, with his head bowed, and a little balloon coming out of his mouth with his three words, and behind him, Zeidman, small and pink and polite, carrying a tiny briefcase in one hand, with Ginzburg's words coming out of his mouth too in a balloon, because he always does what he sees someone else doing. But the best idea of all is the one with Munin. It's like this: on the Holiday Greetings stamp for 1953 there's a picture of a white dove flying nobly in the air and it says on the stamp, *My dove in the mountain clefts*, and for three days Momik sat down and drew maybe twenty sketches till it came out the way he wanted, a picture of Mr. Munin flying in the air with a bunch of other little birds that always fly around with him because of the bread he crumbles, and Momik drew Munin just like he is in real life, with his black hat and his big red nose like a kartofeleh, only in the picture Momik gave him white wings too like a dove, and in the corner he drew a little white star and wrote *Happiness*, because that's where Munin wants to go so much, isn't it? And there were a lot of other pretty and interesting stamps in his collection, like Marilyn Monroe with her blond hair, as pretty as Hannah Zeitrin's wig, and in the margin he wrote (Bella helped him translate), *Marilyn Monroe redst Yiddish*, because she did promise, but the one with Marilyn is just for fun, and the important stamps in the collection were the new ones from Over There and all the places and historical things like the Old Klauiz (he drew it like the new Cultural Center), and the annual fair at Neustadt which the Prophet Elijah in person used to attend, they said, disguised as a poor farmer, and the hanging pole in Plonsk with the terrible criminal Bobo hanging from it, and he also drew the Jewish Olympics, and even Elijah Leib the miser from Hannah Zeitrin's shtetl who they said wouldn't give his wife any lunch to eat (he was such a miser), and in the stamp you could see where the miser drew a Mogen David with his knife on a loaf of bread so no one would take any while he was out, and then Momik made another series, very well drawn, with all the animals from Over There. He was pretty lucky with that series because by chance he found statues of all the animals on the glass buffet in Bella's living room. He'd been there a thousand times and he never understood what they were till Grandfather Anshel arrived and Momik started to fight and then suddenly he realized that those tiny colored-

glass figures were obviously the kind of animals they used to have Over There, because that's where Bella brought them from! On Bella's buffet there were blue gazelles, green elephants, purple eagles, and fish with long, bright, delicate fins, and a kangaroo, and lions, all dainty and tiny and transparent, trapped inside the glass, and you're not allowed to touch them because they're breakable, and they look as if they froze in motion, which is just what happened to everyone from Over There.

Anyway, that afternoon Momik drew a picture of Shaya Weintraub with a head like an ear of corn, with a wrinkled forehead from thinking so much, and over him he drew a bottle of Passover wine and matzo, and then he drew good old Motl as the parachutist on the Tenth Anniversary of Hebrew Parachuting stamp, and he cut out little teeth on the new stamps and pasted them in his stamp notebook, and looked at his watch and saw that it was six already, and then he turned the radio on because it was time for *Children's Corner*, and they told the story of King Matt I, and Momik listened, but he jumped up every other minute because he remembered something or other he'd forgotten to do, like sharpening his pencils till they were sharp as a pin, or shining Mama's and Papa's shoes and his own shoes too on a piece of newspaper till they glistened and gave him naches, or making a note in his geography notebook, the secret one, about what he read in the paper yesterday, that the first two mares at the Hebrew Agricultural Exhibit at Beit Dagan are already pregnant, and everyone's waiting, and after the program was over he turned the radio off and picked up *Emil and the Detectives* which he likes to read because of the suspense but also because of the five printing errors he enjoys finding and then he can check to see if he's entered them in his notebook of printing errors from books and newspapers (he's collected almost a hundred and seventy errors already), and even though he knows those mistakes from *Emil and the Detectives* have been in his notebook for a long time, it's 6:33 already, and now Momik goes over to the living-room couch and lies down under the picture his parents got from Idka and Shimmik, a big oil painting of a forest and snow and a stream and a bridge, which must be what Neustadt looked like or Dinov where his old friend once lived, and if you lie down in a certain way, kind of curled up on the couch, you can see when you look up through the branches of the tree in the corner there's a face almost like a child's face which only Momik knows about, and maybe that's his Siamese twin, but you can't tell for

sure, and Momik looks at it very hard but the truth is that today he can't concentrate because his head's been hurting badly for a few days now, his eyes too, but don't get tired yet, because today's war has not even begun.

And then Momik suddenly remembered that it was a couple of hours already since he'd decided to become a writer and so far he hadn't written anything, and the reason was that he hadn't found anything to write about. What did he know about dangerous criminals like in *Emil and the Detectives*, or about submarines like in Jules Verne, and his own life seemed so ordinary and boring, all he was was a nine-year-old kid, what's there to tell about that, and he checked his big yellow watch again, and slid off the couch and walked around in circles saying comically, It makes my head ache to watch you krechtzing and spinning like a top, Tuvia, as a certain person we know says to another person, but it wasn't really so comical, though at least when he looked at his watch again it was twenty-one minutes to seven already, and in his head he started broadcasting the final minutes of the big game soon to take place in Yaroslav, Poland, between us and the Polish team, and he let them win by four goals, and then with only five minutes to go and the situation looking kaput, our coach, Giulia Mandy, raised his sad eyes to the bleachers full of cheering Poles, when who should he see there but a boy! And one look is enough to tell him that this boy is a born soccer player, the player who will save the day, and if only they had let the boy play at school he would have shown them too, oh well, and Giulia Mandy stops the game and whispers something to the referee, and the referee agrees, and a hush falls over the crowd, and Momik wends his way down the stairs to the playing field where he plans a really spectacular defense and offense (he had some experience training Alex Tochner), and in less than four minutes Momik has turned the tide, as they say, and our team wins 5-4, please God, amen, and the time was now fourteen minutes to seven, nu, pretty soon now, and Momik went to the bathroom and washed his face with warm water and held his head exactly where the long crack runs down the middle of the mirror, and he heard the rain start falling outside and the police car that went around the block warning people to drive slowly, and all of a sudden Momik remembered he forgot to give Grandfather his tea and laxative at four o'clock, and he felt a sting of conscience, you could do just about anything to Grandfather and he wouldn't even notice,

like a baby, and lucky for him Momik was so goodhearted, because other children might take advantage of a dodo like Grandfather and do mean things to him, and Momik stuck his head out the bathroom door and heard Grandfather waking up and talking to himself as usual, and with nine minutes to go, Momik removes his braces and brushes his teeth with ivory toothpaste which is made from special elephants they grow at the Health Clinic, and meanwhile he practices saying words that have the letter *S* because when they put braces on you, it ruins your *S* and you have to make sure you don't lose it, and then finally the living-room clock strikes seven, and in the distance, from Bella's house maybe, comes the sound of news beeps, and Momik's heart races and he counts the steps from the lottery booth to the house but more slowly because they have trouble walking, and the sweat behind his knees and elbows itches, and exactly when he predicted it (almost), he heard the gate creaking in the yard and Papa's cough, and a moment later the door opened and there stood Mama and Papa who quietly said hello, and with their coats still on, and their gloves and the boots lined with nylon bags, their eyes devoured him, and even though Momik could actually feel himself being devoured, he just stood there quietly and let them do it because he knew that was what they needed, and then Grandfather Anshel came out of his room all confused in the big coat and Papa's old shoes on backward, and he tried to go outside in his pajamas but Papa stopped him gently and said, We're going to eat now, Papa; he's always gentle with poor things like him and Max and Moritz, he's nice to them and he feels sorry for them, and Grandfather doesn't understand what's holding him back and he puts up a fight, but in the end he just gives in and lets himself be seated at the table, but he doesn't let them take his coat away.

Supper:

It goes like this: first Mama and Momik set the table very fast, and Mama warms up the big pots from the refrigerator, and then she brings supper in. This is when it starts getting dangerous. Mama and Papa chew with all their might. They sweat and their eyes bulge out of their heads and Momik pretends to be eating while he watches them carefully, wondering how a woman as fat as Mama could come out of Grandma Henny, and how the two of them could have had a scarecrow boy like him. He only tastes what's on the tip of his fork, but it sticks in his

throat because he's so nervous. This is just how it is—his parents have to eat a lot of food every night to make them strong. Once they escaped from death, but it isn't going to let them get away a second time, that's for sure. Momik crumbles his bread into little wads which he arranges in squares. Then he makes an even bigger ball of dough, and breaks it exactly in half, and then in half again. And again. You need the hands of a heart surgeon for this kind of precision. And again in half. They won't get angry with him for doing things like this at supper, he knows, because they're not paying any attention to him. Grandfather, in his big woolly overcoat, tells himself the *Herrneigel* story, sucking on a piece of bread. Mama is all red now and puffing with effort. She chews so hard you can't see her neck. The sweat runs down Papa's forehead. They mop the pots with big chunks of bread and gobble them up. Momik swallows spit and his glasses steam. Mama and Papa vanish then and return behind the pots and frying pans. Their shadows dance on the wall behind them. Suddenly they seem to be floating away on the warm steam from the soup pot and he almost shrieks in fear; God help them, he says in Hebrew in his heart, and translates it into Yiddish so God will understand, *Mir zal zein far deine beindelach*, Do something to me instead and have mercy on their little bones, as Mama always says about him.

And then comes the big moment when Papa lays his fork aside and gives a long *krechitz*, and looks around as if he only just noticed he was home, and that he has a son, and that there's a grandfather sitting there. The battle is over. They've earned another day. Momik jumps up and runs to the kitchen faucet and drinks and drinks. Now comes the talking and the annoying questions, but how can you get angry with someone whose life has just been saved by a miracle? Then Momik tells them that he did his homework and that tomorrow he'll start preparing for the Bible test, and that his teacher asked again why his parents won't let him go on the class trip to Mt. Tabor with everybody else (a new teacher who doesn't know), and meanwhile Papa stands up and goes over to the coffee table in the living room, and unbuckles his belt, and his body floods over like a river that fills the room and just about pushes Momik into the kitchen, and Papa sticks his hand out and starts fiddling with the radio. He always does it like that. He waits for the radio to warm up and then starts turning the dial. Warsaw Berlin Prague London Moscow, not really listening, he hears a word or two and turns it some

more, Paris Bucharest Budapest, no patience at all, from country to country he moves like that, from city to city, he never stops moving and only Momik guesses that he's waiting for a message from Over There, a message calling him back from exile so that he can be the Emperor he really is again, not like he is here, but so far they haven't called.

And then Papa just gives up and turns the dial back to the Voice of Israel, and listens to the program about Knesset committees, and closes his eyes and you might think he was sleeping, but he hears every single word, and to whatever they say there he makes nasty remarks, and anyway, politics is something that makes him furious and dangerous, and Momik stands in the doorway to the kitchen, and hears Mama counting the forks and knives in her singsong as she dries them, secretly watching Papa's arms falling limply on both sides of the chair. His fingers are puffy, with gray hair on the joints, and you can't tell how they feel when they touch you because they don't.

In bed at night, Momik lies awake thinking. Over There must have been a lovely land with forests everywhere and shiny railroad tracks, and bright, pretty trains, and military parades, and the brave Emperor and the royal hunter, and the Klauiz and the animal fair, and transparent jewel-like animals that shine in the mountains like raisins on a cake. The only trouble is, there's a curse on Over There. And this is where it starts getting kind of blurry. There's this spell that was put on all the children and grownups and animals, and it made them freeze. The Nazi Beast did it. It roamed the country, freezing everything with its icy breath like the Snow Queen in the story Momik read. Momik lies in bed imagining, while Mama works at her machine in the hallway. Her foot goes up and down. Shimmik adjusted the pedal a little higher up because otherwise her foot wouldn't reach it. Over There everyone is covered in a very thin layer of glass that keeps them motionless, and you can't touch them, and they're sort of alive but sort of not, and there's only one person in the whole world who can save them and that's Momik. Momik is almost like Dr. Herzl, only different. He made a blue and white flag for Over There, and between the two blue stripes he drew an enormous drumstick tied to the back of a Super Mystère, and below it he wrote the words *If so you will, it is no fairy tale*, but he knows he doesn't have the least idea yet about what he's supposed to do, and that kind of worries him.

Sometimes they come into his room at night and stand next to his bed. They just want to take one last look at him before they start with the nightmares. That's when Momik strains every muscle to look as if he's asleep, to look like a healthy, happy boy, just as cheerful as he can be, always smiling, even in his sleep, ai-li-luli-luli, we have the most hilarious dreams around here, and sometimes he has a really Einsteiny idea, like when he pretends to be talking in his sleep and says, Kick it to me, Joe, we're going to win this game, Danny, and things like that to make them happy, and once on a really horrible day when Grandfather wanted to go outside after supper and they had to lock him up in his room and he started hollering and Mama cried, well, that horrible day Momik pretended to be asleep and he sang them the national anthem and got so carried away he wet his bed, and all to make them understand they didn't have to get so upset, they didn't have to waste their fears on him or anything, they ought to be saving their strength for the really important things, like supper and their dreams and all the silences, and then just as he was finally falling asleep he heard as if in the distance, or maybe he was dreaming already, Hannah Zeitrin calling God to come already, and also the quiet yowling of the cat who was going crazy in the cellar, and Momik promised to try even harder from now on.

He had two brothers.

Or put it this way, once he had a friend.

The friend's name was Alex Tochner. Alex came from Rumania last year and he knew only a little Hebrew. Netta the teacher sat him next to Momik, because Momik would be a good example, and also because he knows Hebrew best in the whole class, and also maybe because she knew Momik wouldn't make fun of Alex. And when Alex sat down next to Momik, the whole class started laughing at them because they were two four-eyes.

Alex Tochner was short but very strong. Whenever he wrote something his arm muscles popped out. He had bristly yellow hair, and even though he wore glasses, they didn't look as if they were for reading. He was always fidgeting and he didn't talk much. When he did talk though he rolled his *r*'s, like the old people. The children called them "the two Polacks," and Momik and Alex hardly spoke a word to each other. But then Momik decided to do something, and one day during

General Science he passed Alex a note asking if maybe he could come over after school tomorrow. Alex shrugged his shoulders and said yeah, he guessed so. Momik could hardly sit still for the rest of the day. After supper he asked Mama and Papa if it would be all right to bring home a friend, and Mama and Papa gave each other a look and started asking him a bunch of questions like Who is this friend, what does he want from Momik, and is he one of us or one of them, and is he the kind that steals things and would he go snooping around the house, and what do his parents do? Momik told them everything and in the end they said it was all right if he wanted to bring him over, but to keep an eye on him. That night Momik was too excited to sleep. He thought about how he and Alex would get along together, and how they would be a two-man team, how this, and how that, and the next morning he was at school by 7:30.

After school Alex came over and they went out for a falafel at the shopping center; Alex liked falafel, Momik didn't, but it was exciting to pay and eat out for once, and in the end he gave his half to Alex; Alex used so much hot sauce the falafel man said he'd have to charge him double. Then they went home and did their homework and then they played checkers. It was definitely more fun to play with another person. Momik made up his mind that night to be a man from now on and keep his mouth shut like Alex, but he couldn't not talk, because what are friends for? What, were they supposed to just keep quiet like a couple of blockheads? And he went on asking Alex questions about Alex and Alex's homework and about where Alex came from, and Alex gave him short answers and Momik was afraid Alex was getting bored and that he'd leave, and he ran to the kitchen and climbed up on a chair and reached into Mama's hiding place and took out the bar of chocolate which isn't for company, but this was an emergency, as they say, and when he offered it to Alex he told him that Grandma Henny died not long ago and Alex took one square of chocolate and then another square and said his father died too, and Momik was excited because he knows about things like that, and he asked if his father was killed by Them, and Alex didn't understand what he meant by Them and said that his father was killed in an accident, he was a boxer and he was knocked out, and now Alex was the man of the house. Momik was silent thinking, What an interesting life this Alex has, and Alex said, "Over There I was the best runner in my class."

Momik, who knew the record times of all Olympic runners and class champions by heart, said that to be on the team here you had to run sixty meters in 8.5, and Alex said maybe he wasn't in condition right now, but if he started working out he'd make the team for sure. He liked to talk big, and he never smiled at Momik, and he ate up square after square of the chocolate bar that would normally have lasted a month. "They called me an Ashkenazi Bech Bech," said Alex woodenly, "and that's why I'm gonna make the team." Momik said, "They're Ashkenazim too, you know, not all of them, but the ones who called you that." "Nobody calls Alex a Bech Bech."

Alex had so much confidence that Momik was sure he would win, but at the same time he felt kind of glum and he didn't know why. Alex hung around for a little while longer, shamelessly touching everything in sight. He twirled the sewing machine wheel roughly, asked questions guests aren't supposed to ask, and then he said he was sick of being in the house, so Momik jumped up and asked if maybe he wanted a nice cup of tea, because that's what you say when the guests (like Bella or Idka and Shimmik) say they'd better be going now, but Alex made a face and said, There's nothing to do around here, and Momik thought a minute and said maybe they could go hang out at Bella's café because she always had very interesting things to tell, and Alex made another face and asked Momik was he always like this, and Momik didn't understand and asked, Like what? and Alex asked, Aren't there any kids on this street? and Momik said, No, it's not a very big street. He was surprised because he'd thought that Alex, since he was a new immigrant, wouldn't want to play with the other children, that's why Momik hoped he and Alex could be buddies, because Momik is well behaved and nice and he doesn't make fun of people or cuss and things like that, but Momik thought, Well, Alex is still a new immigrant and he doesn't know what's what yet exactly, and it might take a little while for him to catch on that Momik has more in his little finger than all those hooligans and ruffians who laugh and run the sixty at 8.5. So anyway, they walked down the street together, and it was autumn, and the old pear tree in Bella's yard was full of half-rotten fruit, and Alex looked up and said, What?! You've gotta be crazy to let this go! and he sneaked into the yard and swiped a couple of pears and gave one to Momik, and Momik, whose heart was pounding, took a bite and chewed but didn't swallow, because that's stealing, and look who from,

too. They walked in the direction of Mt. Herzl, and Alex again said that he was going to make the team, and suddenly Momik had a really brainy idea, and he told Alex that he would be his coach, and Alex said, "You?! You don't know noth . . ." but Momik quickly explained that he would be an excellent coach, that he'd read things about all the coaches in the world, that at home he had sports pictures and clippings from the newspapers ("And I mean newspapers from all over the world," he said, which wasn't exactly a lie because of *Pshegeland*), and that he could draw up an Olympic training schedule, and that his watch had a second hand, which is the main thing a running coach needs. Alex wanted to see the watch, and Momik showed it to him, and Alex said, Let's try it out, I'll run over to that pole and you time me, and Momik said, Ready Set Go, and Alex ran and Momik timed him and said 10.9, and maybe we shouldn't wave our hands around like that because it wastes energy, and Alex said maybe he wouldn't mind a little coaching, but he didn't feel like coming over to Momik's house anymore. That's how the great friendship began, but Momik doesn't like to think about it anymore.

And he has a pair of brothers too.

The older one's name is Bill. Every month the magazine with the latest adventure comes in at Lipschitz's in the shopping center. Momik stands in the corner and reads and Lipschitz doesn't say anything, because he and Mama come from the same shtetl. And the stories are suspenseful and educational too. His brother Bill is pretty tough. He's so tough he's not allowed to stick up for Momik if someone in Momik's class bothers him, because one blow from Bill and you're dead, and that's why Momik made Bill promise never ever to stick up for him, not even when that business with Laizer the Crook started, and at least twice a week Momik picks himself up off the schoolyard full of blood and dirt but smiling a mysterious smile, because he has mastered his impulses once again, as they say, and held Bill in check.

Bill calls him Johnny, and when they talk together they use short sentences with a lot of exclamation marks, like Punch him in the jaw, Bill!! Good work, Johnny!! etc. Bill has a silver star on his chest which means he's a sheriff. Momik doesn't have a star yet. Together they own a horse called Blacky. Blacky understands every word you say, and he loves to gallop wildly through the countryside, but in the end he always comes back and nuzzles Momik's chest with his head, and it's great,

and just then Netta the teacher asks, Just what are we smiling about, Shlomo Neuman? and Momik hides Blacky away. He steals sugar from the kitchen and experiments with different ways of making sugar cubes which is what Blacky likes best, but so far no luck, and the *Hebrew Encyclopedia* isn't up to Sugar yet, and meanwhile he'll just have to find some way to feed this horse of his, won't he. At least three times a week they go galloping through the Ein Kerem Valley in search of missing children or children whose parents lost them, and they set Orde Wingate ambushes for train robbers. Sometimes as Momik lies on his stomach in ambush, he sees the tall smokestack of the new building they just finished over on Mt. Herzl, which they call Yad Vashem, a funny sort of name, and he pretends it's a ship sailing by, full of illegal immigrants from Over There that nobody wants to take in, like in the days of the British Mandate pshakrev, and he's going to have to rescue that ship somehow, with Blacky or Bill or with mindpower or with his animals or the atomic reactor or with Grandfather Anshel's story and the Children of the Heart, anything, and when he asked his old people what the smokestack is for, they looked at each other, and finally Munin told him that there's a museum there, and Aaron Marcus, who hadn't been out of his house for a couple of years, asked, Is it an art museum? and Hannah Zeitrin smiled crookedly and said, Oh sure it is, a museum of human art, that's what kind of art.

And the whole time they're there in ambush Momik has to keep making sure Bill's star isn't flashing light, so that the criminals won't spot them, but anyway Bill gets killed at least twenty times a day by the bullets and knives of the villains, and in the end he always comes back to life, thanks to Momik who gets really scared when Bill dies, and maybe it's the fear, his very hopelessness, you might say, that brings Bill back to life, and he sits up and smiles and says, "Thanks, Johnny, you saved my life!!" And meanwhile Blacky gorges himself on sugar cubes stuck together with mud and spit, and sugar cubes made out of plastic glue, and sugar cubes Momik freezes between the ice blocks in Eizer the milkman's ice chest, and Bill died and came back to life and died and came back to life again and again, and that was the best part of the game, only it wasn't really a game at all, a game, ha! Momik didn't enjoy it one bit, but he could never dream of stopping it because he has to practice, because there are so many people waiting for him to become a leading world expert, just as everyone waited for Professor

Jonas Salk to invent the polio vaccine, and Momik knows someone's got to be the first to volunteer to enter the frozen kingdom and fight the Beast and rescue all the people and take them away, and you just have to have a plan, that's all, something that hero Captain Meir Har-Zion would do if he were fighting it, a bold, daring stunt maybe only Giulia Mandy the coach we brought here all the way from Hungary could devise to make his parents better both now and backward in time, only the Beast doesn't seem to want to take off its disguises yet, and there hasn't been that much progress with the animals lately either, and it made him feel bad to think maybe he was keeping all those poor animals in the dark for nothing, but then he would tell himself, In war there's suffering and sometimes the innocent suffer too (these are the words that came to him), like Laika the dog who sacrificed herself on the scientific altar of Sputnik 2, so he was just going to have to try harder and sleep less, never forgetting the example of Grandfather Anshel, who tells his story in the hope of someday beating Herrnigel once and for all, and sometimes Momik has a feeling Grandfather is getting so mixed up in his story that Herrnigel must be losing patience too.

And one time at lunch there was a terrible rumpus. Grandfather started screaming at the top of his lungs, and then he cupped his hand over his ear and listened, and his face turned red and his lips were trembling, and Momik jumped up and went over to the door because suddenly he understood all the things he hadn't understood before, stupid him, that Herrnigel himself was the Nazikaput, because kaput means finished, as Momik knew from Hebrew, and a Nazi is a beast and now it was clear to him that Herrnigel was angry with Grandfather because of the story, because he didn't want to be kaput and so he was trying to force Grandfather to change the story the way he wanted it, but Grandfather is no weakling, that's for sure, you touch his story and he turns into a different man! Yes, Grandfather grabbed a drumstick and waved it wildly, hollering in old-fashioned Hebrew that he would not let Herrnigel interfere with his story because his story was his whole life, and Momik, whose heart sank all the way down to his underpants, saw by the look on Grandfather's face that Nazikaput was getting a little worried now and he must have decided to give in to Grandfather because Grandfather was so convincingly in the right, but suddenly Grandfather turned away from the wall and stared blankly at

Momik, and Momik knew that if Grandfather wanted to, he could pull him right into his story just the way he did Herrnigel, and Momik would have run away only he couldn't move, and he tried to scream but no sound came out, and then Grandfather motioned with his finger for Momik to come closer, and it was like a magic spell, Momik moved toward him thinking, This is it, he would get into Grandfather's story now and nobody would ever find him, and he was just lucky Grandfather didn't want to do that to him, he wouldn't do a thing like that to Momik, Momik was such a good little boy; okay, maybe he tortures the animals in the cellar a little but that's because of the war, and then when he got up close to Grandfather, Grandfather said in a low, clear voice, like a completely normal person, Nu, did you see that goy? Oich mir a chucham, and Grandfather smiled a normal smile at Momik, like a smart and ancient man, and he put his hand on Momik's shoulder like a real grandfather and whispered in his ear that he was going to turn this goy around and send him back to Chelm, and Momik didn't want to miss his big chance to ask Grandfather what the story was about, and find out if he was right that the Children of the Heart were after Herrnigel, and by the way, what did they need that baby for (Momik does know something about suspense stories and when there's danger, babies are big trouble), but then the usual thing happened: Grandfather stepped back and stared at Momik as though he'd never seen him before in his life, and he started talking very fast, saying those things he always says in that tune, and Momik was all alone again.

Then as he slipped his untouched lunch into a brown paper bag for the animals, he started thinking that maybe it would be a good idea to consult this expert he read about in the newspaper, the expert who's in the same profession as Momik. Wiesenthal, they call him, and he lives in Vienna, which is where he sets off from to hunt them. Momik hoped that if he wrote him a letter, the hunter would give him some information about important matters, like where they hide and what their habits are in food and prey, and also if they run in herds, and how can it be that out of one single beast comes a whole army of people, and whether there's some magic word (Momik thinks there isn't) like "Chaimova" or "uranium" that if you say it to them makes them obey you and follow you everywhere, and maybe the hunter has a picture of them, alive or dead, so that Momik will be able to see what he's looking for. Momik was pretty busy for a few days planning what to

write to him. He tried to imagine the hunter's house, with big rugs made from the fur of the Beast, and a special shelf for rifles and bows and pipes, and heads of Nazi Beasts hunted down in the jungles hanging from the wall, with glassy eyes, and Momik tried to write the letter, but it didn't come out right, he tried maybe twenty times but it still didn't come out right, and that week it said in Bella's newspaper that the hunter was setting off on another trip to South America, and they showed a picture, a man with nice, sad eyes, with a bald forehead, not at all as Momik imagined, so Momik was left alone again with no one to help him, and now he was getting a little nervous.

But he told himself that the hunter wouldn't be able to help him anyway, because the weird thing about this war against the Beast is that each person has to fight it alone, and even people who really need his help can't ask straight out, because of this secret oath it seems they've taken, and Momik keeps telling himself that he isn't trying hard enough and that he isn't concentrating hard enough, and it was also around this time that he had a couple of hunting accidents, starting when an abandoned jackal cub bit him under the knee and he had to have twelve agonizing rabies shots. And after that he accidentally fell on top of a little porcupine that was hiding under a bush in the valley, and his knee began to look like a sieve. Momik had always liked reading about animals, but it wasn't until he started fighting the Beast that he'd ever had to actually touch one, and the truth is, it kind of disgusted him, though in a way it didn't. He had a real instinct for animals, he guessed, and maybe when it was all over, he would get himself a pet dog. A regular dog. Not for the war, for fun. But meanwhile the injured pigeon he found in the back yard practically pecked his eye out, and another cat he tried to catch by the garbage cans as a replacement for his crazy cat scratched his arm all over. Momik was certainly being brave in this war. He never knew he could be so brave, but it was bravery out of fear, and he knew it. Because he was afraid. And what about the ravens, the parents of the raven that was his prisoner, who now knew for sure that Momik was the one who snatched their kid, and every time he went out of the house they swooped down on him like a pair of Egyptian MiGs, and the first time it happened, by the way, one of the ravens actually jabbed his neck and arm and he almost had a fit, as they say, and he ran all the way to the lottery booth and told Mama and Papa about the attack, but he didn't explain it too well, and also he didn't

know the word for raven in Yiddish, and Mama didn't quite understand seeing the blood and the rip in his shirt, and she rushed him over to the health clinic and shrieked and fainted as she tried to explain to Dr. Erdreich that something terrible happened, an eagle tried to take my child away, and some people in Beit Mazmil remember Momik to this day as the child the eagle tried to snatch.

But it was no use. The cellar was turning blacker and more suffocating every day, and Momik didn't dare make a move. The animals grew wild and voracious, and flung themselves against the walls of their cages, and hurt themselves and howled and shrieked. The injured pigeon died, and it was too sickening to take the body out, and it started to stink and the ants came in, cholera. Momik always had this feeling that the cellar was full of big, sticky old cobwebs just waiting to grab him if he made a move. He'd never felt so dirty and smelly in his whole life. These little animals were a lot stronger than he was, he could see that now, because they hated him and they knew what it meant to be wild and to fling themselves and shriek in their cages, and he thought maybe that was a sign that the war had begun and the Beast wasn't kidding around anymore, that it was sneaking up on him now, paralyzing him with a polio Jonas Salk had never dreamed of, and this was serious, because Momik couldn't tell where the Beast was going to pounce from, he didn't know what to do if it decided to show itself, maybe it would pounce out of two animals at the same time, how would he be able to say something like "Chaimova" before it tore him to shreds?

He rubbed some kerosene from the heater all over his arms and legs so that maybe the smell would make it sick, and he also put a mothball in each pocket of his shirt and trousers, but that still didn't seem like enough, so then he decided to write a welcoming address. It took him at least a week to write it, and he knew that it would have to be the best speech in the whole world to have an effect on the Beast the split second before it attacked. First he wrote how you should always be good and think of the other person, and that you have to learn how to forgive like on Yom Kippur, but when he read it out loud, he knew the Beast would never believe this kind of thing. It had to be stronger. He tried to figure out how the Beast feels things, what affects it. He tried to draw a picture of it, but it came out looking like a lonely little polar bear, full of anger and hating the whole world, and he understood

now that the speech was going to have to wipe out all the hatred and loneliness in one stroke, because there are things even a frozen polar bear longs for in its heart, so then Momik wrote a long speech about friendship between two friends who love each other, and about nice, simple conversations between a mother and father and a father and son. And he told the Beast about how sweet little brothers and sisters are, and how much fun it is to pick them up and put them in their strollers and show them off at the shopping center, and other silly things; he had a feeling this was the kind of thing that would really get the Beast, like a soccer tournament when you score and everyone cheers and no one calls you names, or like a Saturday morning walk with Mama and Papa when they both hold him by the hand and say, "Little bird, little bird, fly a-wayyyy!" and toss him in the air, or like the school trip to Mt. Tabor, when the whole class goes hiking and they sing songs, and at night they whoop it up in the hostel, but when he saw it written down, he knew it was a stupid speech, a sickening speech, it was a crummy stinking speech, and he tore it to pieces and burned it in the kitchen sink, and decided to give up on the speech idea and just sit and wait and see what it would do when it turned up, and it was clear to Momik now that the Beast was only stalling like this to get him mad and bring him down even more, and he made up his mind to show the Beast it could never-ever-black-and-blue do that to him.

And for two weeks it did look as if there was going to be a chance for a surprise victory, because a third brother had now joined the other two: Motl Ben Paisee, the Chazzan. Momik would never forget those days. In school they read this story by Sholem Aleichem, and Momik had a strong feeling about it and decided to say something sort of casually after supper. Nu, Papa opened his mouth and started to talk! He talked in complete sentences, and Momik listened and almost cried for joy. Papa's eyes, which are blue with red rims, turned a little brighter, as if the Beast had left them for a second. Momik was as sly as a young fox! Like the fox in the story about the cheese and the raven! He told Papa (casually) about My Brother Elijah, and Manny the calf, and the river they poured barrels of kvass into, and with your own eyes you could see the Beast open its mouth a little, to let Papa tumble right out to Momik.

Little by little Papa told him all about his tiny village and the muddy lanes and the chestnut trees we don't have in this country, and the old

fishmonger and the water drawer and the lilac blossoms, and the heavenly taste of bread Over There, and the cheder, which was the school-room, and the rebbe, who earned a little extra money mending broken pottery with the help of a wire he would wind around the pots, and how at the age of three he used to walk home from cheder all by himself on snowy nights, lighting his way with a special lamp made out of a radish with a candle stuck inside it, and then Mama said, There was a kind of bread there they don't have in this country, now when you mention it, yes I remember: we used to bake it at home, where else, and it lasted the week, if I could taste that taste once more in my life, and Papa said, Where we used to live, between our village and Chodorov, there was a big forest. A real forest, not like these toothless combs the National Smashional Fund plants around here, in that forest we had big pojomkes they don't have in this country, like great big cherries, and Momik was amazed to hear that there was a village called Chodorov just like the name of the goalkeeper on the Tel Aviv Ha Poel team, but he didn't want to interrupt so he kept quiet, and Mama gave a little krechts full of memories and said, Yes, but where I come from we called them yagedes, and Papa said, No, yagedes is something else, yagedes is smaller. Ach, the fruit there, a mechayeh, and the grass, you remember the grass? And Mama said, Remember, what do you mean remember, oy, how can I forget, zal ich azoy haben koach tzu leben, may I have the strength to live, how I remember all those things, such green you never saw, and strong, not like the grass in this country that looks half dead, you call that grass, it's a leprosy of the earth, and Over There when they mowed the wheat and stacked it in the fields, remember, Tuvia? Ach! says Papa inhaling, and the way it smelled! Where we lived people used to be afraid to fall asleep on a fresh bale, God forbid they shouldn't be able to wake up again . . .

They talked like this to each other and they both talked to Momik. This was why Momik read some other stories by Sholem Aleichem (what a funny name for a writer!), which they didn't even tell you to read in school. He borrowed the stories about Menachem Mendel and Tevye the Dairyman from the school library, and read them chapter by chapter, quickly and thoroughly the way he does. The village was becoming very familiar to him. In the first place, he realized that there were a lot of things he knew about already from his friends on the bench, and whatever he didn't understand Papa was glad to explain,

words like gabai, galach, melamed dardakai, and things like that. And each time Papa would start explaining, he thought of something else and would tell a little more, and Momik remembered everything, and afterward he would run to his room and write it down in his geography notebook (he was up to notebook 3 by now!), and on the last pages of the notebook he made a little dictionary with the translation of the words in the language of Over There into our language Hebrew, and so far he had eighty-five words. In geography class at school, with the atlas open on his desk, Momik carried out experiments, substituting Boibrik for Tel Aviv, and Haifa for Katrielibka with Mt. Carmel for the Hill of the Jews, the hill where miracles happen, and Jerusalem is Yahoupitz, and Momik made little pencil marks like an army commander makes on a battle map: Menachem Mendel goes from here to there, from Odessa to Yahoupitz and Zamrinka, and the Menashe Forest is where Tevye rides his old horse, and the Jordan is the San River which demanded a fresh victim every year, they believed, till one day the rabbi's son drowned and the rabbi cursed the river and it shrank to the size of a little creek, and on Mt. Tabor Momik writes Goldeneh Bergel, and pencils in the little barrels of gold that the King of Sweden left there when he was running away from the Russians, and on Mt. Arbel he draws a small cave, like the one Dobush the terrible robber dug in the mountain near Mama's town, Bolichov, to hide in and plot his crimes. Momik has no end of ideas.

And down in Ein Kerem, three brothers galloped their horse Blacky, wildly and fiercely, holding each other by the waist. Bill the strong one sat in front, Momik the responsible one sat in the middle, and Motl sat in the rear, his payes curled behind his ears, his eyes gleaming, and his muscles getting stronger by the day, and soon they would be able to take him out on a real mission.

Okay, so there were a lot of things you had to explain to him that he never knew before like what the sound barrier is, which is broken by the jets given to us by our Eternal Allies the French, and who Nathaniel Balsberg the religious runner on the Elizur track team is, who beat the five-kilometer record, with-the-help-of-God, and what the Suleiman Fire Gang is, and what exactly they use the swimming pool at the new atomic reactor in Nahal Soreq for, and how you should always have a piece of cardboard folded in your shirt pocket wherever you go, to stop bullets aimed at your heart, and what a reprisal is, one

fist three fingers, and Motl nearly botched things up because he just didn't know how to sit still in an ambush and wait quietly, or what an Uzi is, and a Super Mystère and an EMX, because in his shtetl they probably had different names for guns and airplanes.

One time Momik dawdled in the school library waiting for it to get dark outside, and Mrs. Govrin told him to go home, so he hung around a little while longer in the playground, and when the coast was clear, he took the big surprise out of his schoolbag, the radish he had cut in two and scooped out with his jackknife, and he stuck a candle into the radish and lit it, and walked all the way home like this in a very gentle rain that didn't blow the candle out, through the snowdrifts of the chestnut forest and the lilac groves and the big pojomkes which might in fact be yagedes, but who cares, and the good smell of the bread they baked at home, and the big river with the tadpoles and the tiny leeches, and the animal fair where they sold the good horse they loved dearly because they didn't have enough money for food, and so the three-year-old child made his way home from Rabbi Itzla's cheder to a house full of boys and girls, brothers and sisters, where he would sit and eat under the table like the gentry, and Mama and Papa came out to meet him because they were worried sick and they saw him walking through the streets of Borochoy, slowly and carefully, shielding the candle with his hand to make sure it wouldn't blow out, striding responsibly with the emotion of the torch runner at the Maccabean Games, all the way here from a foreign land, and Mama and Papa huddled together not knowing what to do, and he looked up at them and wanted to say something beautiful, but all of a sudden Papa's face changed and shrank as if he were disgusted or something, and he raised his enormous hand and smacked the candle with all his might (his fingers didn't touch Momik), and the candle fell into a little puddle and was extinguished, and Papa said in a choked voice, Enough of this nonsense. You pull yourself together now, and be normal, and never again did he tell Momik about his village and how he was a boy there, and Motl never returned again either, maybe he didn't want to, or maybe Momik felt funny because of what had happened, and so, Momik was left alone once more to face the Beast, but the Beast wasn't ready to appear yet.

At night Mama leans over his bed and sniffs his feet which smell of kerosene and then suddenly she says something really hilarious in Yiddish, she says, God, maybe you could play with some other family?

And don't forget there were other things besides the search and the hunter and the sweat to think about, there were regular things too, and no one was allowed to suspect anything was wrong so they wouldn't start asking questions and butting in, and he had tests to study for and there was school every day from eight to one, which is pretty unbearable unless you keep telling yourself that all the kids around you go to a secret school we established in the underground, and whenever you hear footsteps outside you have to get your guns and prepare to die, and there was Grandfather who was becoming grouchier and jumpier than ever to look after, his Nazi must have really been upsetting him, and Momik had strategies and special oaths to think about every time Nasser pshakrev says he's going to stop one of our ships in the Suez Canal, and what about those stupid postcards somebody stuck Momik's name on, and he had to send off more and more postcards with names of people he didn't even know, you erase the top name on the list and add the name of another boy at the bottom, or God forbid something terrible will happen to him, like the banker from Venezuela who didn't take it seriously and lost all his money and his wife died, poor man, and don't even ask how much those postcards cost him, though luckily Mama didn't skimp on this and gave him whatever he needed to mail them all, so anyway besides all the regular things there was that kid Laizer from seventh grade, who'd been snatching Momik's sandwich every day now for three months. At first it really scared him, because how could a boy only three years older than him be such a crook and a shvartzer and desperate enough maybe to commit a terrible crime like extortion which you can go to jail for. But Momik realized that since this was how things stood, he'd better not think about it too much because he had to save his energy for more important things, and since Laizer was stronger than him anyhow, what good would it do to think about it all the time and feel insulted and want to die and start crying, right? And since Momik is a scientific boy who is very good at making decisions, he walked right up to Laizer and explained to him in a logical way that if the other children saw him give his sandwich away, they'd tell the teacher on him, and therefore he had a more spylike method to propose. The extortionist criminal who lived in a hut and had a big scar on his forehead was about to get angry and say something, but then he thought over what Momik told him and just kept quiet. Momik took a piece of paper from his right pocket with a list of the six safest

places in school where you could hide a sandwich which someone else could pick up later without getting into trouble. Momik detected as he read the list out that Laizer was beginning to regret the whole thing, but he was just beginning to develop a little confidence now. From his left pocket he took out a second list he'd made for Laizer. This was a list of all the days of our first trial month (he told Laizer), noting where the sandwich would be on each particular day. Laizer was clearly sorry about the whole thing now. He started to say, Cut the crap, Helen Keller, I was only fooling, who needs your stinkin' sandwich anyway, but Momik wouldn't hear of it, he felt stronger than the criminal now, and though he could have just said okay then, no more extortion, he didn't want to stop, and he practically shoved the papers at Laizer, telling him, We start tomorrow, and the next day he put the sandwich in the appointed place and sat waiting in ambush according to plan, and watched as Laizer walked up, glanced at the paper, looked both ways, and picked up the goods, though he didn't look very happy about it to Momik; in fact, when he peered into the little bag Momik had packed so nicely, he looked thoroughly revolted but there was no choice, like it or lump it, he had to do what Momik said so as not to spoil this devious plan which was more than he and maybe Momik too could handle. And to top it off, Momik had the Beast to fight in various ways he thought up from day to day, because it was clearer than ever now that he must not fail, this was really serious, too many people and things were involved and everything depended on him, and if the Beast wouldn't take off its disguise, it was just being trickier than him, that's all, it had more combat experience than he had, but if it ever did decide to show itself, it would show itself to Momik and no one else, because who else but Momik would challenge it like this, with so much daring, chutzpah, and the devotion of soldiers who charge ahead and fling themselves on the barbed-wire fence so the others can climb over them. And by the end of winter, when the wind was having one last fling at wrecking Beit Mazmil, Momik reversed his tactics, figuring that what he needed in order to fight the Beast was the very thing that most scared it, the thing he'd been avoiding all along, which was to get to know more about the Beast and its crimes, because otherwise he'd just be wasting energy no matter what he did, because the fact of the matter is, he didn't have a clue about how to fight it. And that's the truth. Which is how he got involved with the Holocaust and all that. In total

secrecy, Momik joined the public library (his parents wouldn't allow him to be a member of two libraries) and he would take the Number 18 bus to town some afternoons and read everything the library had on it. The library had a big shelf with a sign saying LIBRARY OF THE HOLOCAUST AND VALOR, and Momik started going through it book by book. He read incredibly fast because he was afraid that time was running out, and though he didn't understand most of it, he knew that someday he would. He read *Mysteries of Fate* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*; *Let Me Stay the Night*, *Feifel*; *The Doll House*; *The Cigarette Vendors of Three-Cross Square*; and many other books. The children he met in the library were kind of like him, like he'd always felt deep inside all these years. They spoke Yiddish at home with their parents and didn't have to hide it, and they were also fighting the Beast, which is the main thing.

On the days Momik didn't go to the library, he would spend hours in the gloomy cellar. From a quarter to two in the afternoon till it got dark, and even a few minutes after sometimes, he would sit on the cold floor in front of the animals with their shiny eyes and nasty noises, and the way they tried to act as if they didn't care when he was around, but he knew it could happen any minute, because obviously even the Beast would crack up if you made it nervous enough by studying its crimes in a scientific way, and by sitting and staring at it so maddeningly day after day, and it took all Momik's effort to sit there one minute more, two minutes more, with his feet firmly planted to keep him from beating it out of there, and he started making weird noises like wheezing or like a kitten squealing, he was beginning to remind himself of Grandfather with all these noises, but he stayed put even after the light coming through the tiny slit in the window faded and it was pitch-dark, and he was doing this because of what seemed to be a very important clue which he found tucked slyly away in *Mysteries of Fate* where it said distinctly, "From utter 'darkness' sprang the Nazi beast."

Day after day. In the adult reading room at the public library Momik sat on a high-backed chair, with his feet dangling down. He told Hillel the librarian that he was working on a special report for school about the Holocaust, and no one asked any questions. He read history books with tiny print about what the Nazis did, and stumbled over a lot of words and expressions that weren't used anymore. He puzzled over some peculiar photographs, he couldn't figure out what was going on

and what went where, but deep down inside he began to sense that these photographs might reveal the first part of the secret everyone had tried to keep from him. There were pictures of a mother and father forced to choose between two children, to choose which one would stay with them and which one would go away forever, and he tried to figure out how they would choose, according to what, and he saw a picture of a soldier forcing an old man to ride another old man like a horse, and he saw pictures of executions in ways he never knew existed, and he saw pictures of graves where a lot of dead people lay in the strangest positions, on top of each other, with somebody's foot stuck in somebody else's face, and somebody's head on so crooked Momik couldn't twist his head around like that, and so little by little Momik started to understand new things, like how weak the human body is, for instance, and how it can break in so many shapes and directions if you want to break it, and how weak a thing a family is if you want to break it, just like that it happens and it's all over. At six in the evening Momik would leave the library, tired and quiet. On the bus home, he didn't see or hear anything.

Almost every day at recess he would sneak out of school and detour around the street where the lottery booth is to Bella's grocery store. He would get there all out of breath, pull her by the hand to the corner (if there happened to be a customer in the store just then), and start firing questions at her in a whisper that was more like a roar: What was the death train, Bella? Why did they kill little children? What do people feel when they have to dig their own graves? Did Hitler have a mother? Did they really use the soap they made out of human beings? Where do they kill people nowadays? What's a Jude? What are experiments with human beings? What and how and why and why and how and what? Bella, who could see for herself by now how important and serious it was, answered his every question and didn't cover anything up, only her face looked miserable and grim. Momik was also a little worried. Not nervous, just very worried. It was getting harder all the time, the Beast was winning, that much was certain, and though he knew everything about it now and wasn't a little nine-and-a-quarter-year-old ninny anymore who believed the Beast would come out of a hedgehog or some poor cat or even a raven, he was still in one terrible mess; he'd found out where the Beast actually was, though he couldn't tell how it happened, or how it could appear from just thinking and

imagining it, but this much was clear, the Beast did exist, he could feel it in his bones the way Bella could tell when it was going to rain, and it was also clear that Momik had been the one who stupidly woke it out of its long sleep, the one who challenged it to come out, the way Judah Ken-Dor challenged the Egyptians at the Mitla Pass to shoot at him, so they'd give themselves away; only Judah Ken-Dor had his buddies covering him from behind, while Momik was all alone, and now he had to fight to the finish, though nobody cared whether he wanted to or not, and he knew only too well that if he ever tried to run away, the Beast would chase him to the ends of the earth (it has spies and supporters everywhere), and little by little, it would do to him what it did to all the others, only this time in an even slyer, more diabolical way, and who could say how many years it would torture him like that and what would happen in the end.

But then singlehandedly Momik discovered how to bring the Beast out of the animals in the cellar, and it was so simple really, it was amazing he hadn't thought of it sooner, since even the sleepy turtle knows it's a turtle when it catches a whiff of cucumber peels, and the raven ruffles its feathers when Momik comes with the drumstick, so quite simply, all Momik had to do now was show the Beast the food it liked best—a Jew.

So then he started to put a plan together, cleverly and very carefully. First he copied out pictures from the library books into his notebook, and made notes to remind him what a Jew looks like, how a Jew looks at a soldier, how a Jew looks when he's frightened, how he looks in a convoy, and how he digs a grave. He also made notes from his own store of experience with Jews, like how a Jew krechtzes, how he screams out in his sleep, and how he chews on a drumstick, etc. Momik worked like a combination scientist and detective. Take the boy in this picture, for instance, the one with the visor cap and his hands up. Momik tried to figure things from the boy's eyes, like what the beast in front of him looked like just then, and whether he knew how to whistle with two fingers, and whether he'd ever heard that Chodorov isn't just the name of a town but the name of a great goalie, and what his parents had done to make him have to stick his hands up like that, and where they were when they ought to have been taking care of him, and whether he was religious or not and had a collection of real stamps from Over There, and whether he'd ever imagined that someday in the State of

Israel, in Beit Mazmil in Jerusalem, there would be a boy called Momik Neuman. There were so many things to find out about how to be a real Jew, about how to have the kind of expression a Jew has, and to give off the exact same smell, like Grandfather, for instance, and Munin, and Max and Moritz, a smell that's known to drive the Beast insane, so that day after day as Momik sits in the dark cellar facing the cages not doing anything much, just staring blindly ahead, trying not to fall asleep, because lately, he doesn't know why, he's sort of exhausted all the time, he can hardly move or concentrate, and sometimes he has these not very nice thoughts, like what does he need this for, and why does he have to do all the fighting himself, and why does no one step in to help him or take notice of what's going on around here, not Mama or Papa, not Bella or the children in his class or his teacher Netta who only screams at him that his grades are going down down down, and not Dag Hammarskjöld from the United Nations who today arrived in Israel and went all the way to Sedeh Boker just to eat supper with Ben-Gurion, this Dag Hammarskjöld who founded UNICEF for the children of the world and worries about saving the children of Africa and India from malaria and other cholerias, the only thing he doesn't have time for is the war on the Beast. And to tell the truth, there are days when Momik sits in the cellar half awake and half asleep and he envies the Beast. Yes, he envies it for being so strong that it never suffers from pity, and that it can sleep soundly at night even after all those things it did, and that it even seems to enjoy being cruel, the way Uncle Shimmik enjoys it when you scratch his back, and maybe the Beast is right and it isn't so terrible to be cruel, but really cruel, and to tell the truth, Momik has also been kind of enjoying it lately when he does something really bad, it happens mostly after dark, when he starts being more afraid and hating the Beast more than ever and hating the whole world, it suddenly happens, he gets this feeling as if he has fever all over but especially in his head and his heart, and he almost explodes with power and cruelty, and that's when he could almost fling himself against the cages and shatter them and smash every head on the Beast without mercy, and could even let it wound him with its claws and teeth and all its beaks, before jamming into it as hard as he can so the Beast will know once and for all what Momik feels, or maybe not, maybe it would be better to kill it without jamming into it, just to smash it and bash it and kick it and stomp on it and torture it and

blow it to bits, and you could even throw an atom bomb in its face now because that article finally came out about our atomic reactor which is huge and awesome rising out of the golden sand dunes of Nahal Rubin near Rishon Le-Zion, towering proudly over the shore and the roaring blue waves, the builders' hammers gaily tapping its splendid dome, that's what it said in the newspaper, and even though the newspaper says "for peaceful purposes," Momik can read between the lines, as they say, and he catches the meaning behind those smiles of Bella's, whose son is a very high-ranking major in the army, peaceful purposes, yeah sure, sure, let them blast the Arabs away pshakrev, but he had to admit the Beast didn't seem too worried by his threats, and sometimes Momik even suspected that whenever he started feeling this way, wild and hateful that is, the Beast was smiling slyly to itself in the dark, and then he would get even more frightened and not know what to do and tell himself, Calm down, but how much longer would he have the strength to calm down all by himself, and he would get frightened like this and wake up from his dream and look around and smell the stench of the animals which clings to him so strongly he sometimes feels as if it's coming out of his mouth, and he doesn't get up even though it's pitch-dark now and his parents are probably worried to death about where he is, and please don't let them think of coming down here to look for him, no they wouldn't come down here, they better not, and he sits a while longer, dozing on the cold stone floor, wrapped in Papa's big old overcoat to which Momik had pinned a lot of yellow cardboard stars, and sometimes when he wakes up and remembers, he reaches out to show the animals what he's glued on his arms with plastic glue, numbers cut out of old lottery tickets he collected by the lottery booth, and if that wasn't enough, he would sit up and pause for a refreshing cough or krechitz, and before he stood to leave, he would challenge the Beast one last time in a really disgusting way, by turning his back on it in the pitch-dark and copying a few passages from the diary of Anne Frank, who also hid from it, into his Geography Notebook #4, and whenever he finished copying out a really sad line from the book (which he stole from the public library), his pen would tremble a little, and then he would have to add a few words of his own about a boy called Momik Neuman who's also hiding like that and fighting and afraid, and the amazing thing is that what he wrote came out sounding just like her, like Anne that is.

And sometimes after lunch, when Momik wants to get Grandfather out of the way and put him to sleep so he can go down to the cellar right away, Grandfather stares at him strangely and begs with his eyes to let him go out for a while, and even though sometimes it's raining and cold outside, Momik can feel how much Grandfather is suffering in the house, and he takes him along, they put their coats on and go out, and lock the bottom lock too, and Momik holds Grandfather's hand and feels the warm currents of Grandfather's story flow into his own hand and up to his head, and he draws strength from Grandfather, unbeknownst to him, and squeezes and squeezes the strength out for himself till finally Grandfather lets out a kind of howl and pulls his hand away and looks at Momik as if he understands something.

They sit down on the wet green bench and watch the gray street that seems slanted on account of the rain, and the fog changes the shapes of things, and everything looks so different, everything is so sad, and out of the wind and the whirling leaves comes a black coat with two tails, or a blond wig, or the two dodos hand in hand, scrounging through the garbage pails, and so Grandfather's friends gather at the bench, though no one told them he was there, and then the door at Bella's opens and cute little Aaron Marcus steps out even though Bella begs him not to, and when she sees that Momik is there too, boy does she ever open her mouth and tell him to take Grandfather home this minute, but Momik just stares at her and doesn't answer, and in the end she slams the door.

Mr. Aaron Marcus walked over and sat down with a krechitz, and they all made room for him and gave a krechitz, and Momik gave one too and it felt good. Momik wasn't afraid anymore of Marcus's twitches which made his face look a hundred years old, may-he-live-to-be-a-hundred-and-twenty. Once he asked Bella whether Marcus made faces on account of some disease, God forbid, or something like that, and Bella said, The father of my Hezkel, may-he-rest-in-peace, deserves more than the inquisitiveness of rude little children who must know everything and what will there be left to learn when they're ten years old, but of course Momik didn't give up—we know Momik and the type of person he is—he went off to think it over, and returned to Bella a little while later and told her he knew the answer. That was funny because meanwhile Bella had forgotten the question, but Momik reminded her and said probably Mr. Marcus makes those faces because

he escaped from a certain place (Momik did not want to spell out that it was Over There) and he wants to keep people from recognizing his real face and capturing him, and Bella pursed her lips as if she was getting angry, but you could see that she was holding back a smile, and she said, Maybe it's the other way around, smarty, maybe Mr. Marcus is trying to keep alive the faces of all the people who were with him in a certain place, and it isn't at all that he wants to run away from them, he wants to stay with them, nu, what do you say to that, Einstein? And this answer knocked Momik for a loop, as they say, and he looked at Mr. Marcus in a completely different way after that, in fact he discovered the faces of a lot of people he never met before in Mr. Marcus's face, old people, men, women, and children and even babies, not to mention the fact that everyone around here made faces all the time, which was a sure sign that Marcus like the others was fighting a secret war.

The rain fell and the old people talked. You could never tell exactly when the noises and the krechtes turned into real talking all of a sudden. They told their usual stories which Momik knew by heart already but loved to hear over and over. Red Sonya and Black Sonya, and Chaim Eche the cripple who played "Sheraleh" at weddings, and that meshuggeneh they called Job who sucked lavender candy and the children dragged him around everywhere like a dog and made him do whatever they wanted by promising him candy, and the big, beautiful mikva they built, and how everyone put the cholent in the bakery on Thursday to cook overnight, and the whole shtetl smelled of it, and this way you could rest from the war and the Beast and the stink in the cellar, you could forget everything and sort of not exist, and just then, for some reason, oftzeluchus as they said around here, he thinks of something annoying and troubling, the memory of a big fat palm slapping the candle, and the candle fell and the flame went *zss* in the puddle, and Papa's face, and the word he said, and suddenly Momik sits up and moves his head away from Hannah Zeitrin's shoulder where he was leaning a little without noticing, and he said in a hard, loud voice that in the big game coming up in Yaroslav we're going to beat those Poles 10 to 0, Stelmach alone will score five, and at once the old ones grew quiet and looked at him blankly, and Hannah Zeitrin said sadly and clearly, Alter kopf, and Yedidya Munin on his other side reached his skinny hand with the black hairs out to him, and for once he wasn't going to pinch his cheek but gently cup his chin and draw it closer

very slowly, who would have believed Momik would let Munin do such a thing to him, and in public too, but now Momik is a little tired and he doesn't mind feeling his face against the black coat with the strange smell, and he thinks it's a good thing he isn't alone and that he has these secret warriors with him here, they're like a band of partisans who fought together for a long long time, and the big battle is about to begin and they've sat down to rest a while in the forest, and though to look at them you'd think they were just a bunch of meshuggeners, who cares, it's so nice to lie here on Munin's coat beside his friends and hear the wool rustling and the quiet ticking of the pocket watch and the heartbeats that seem to come from far away, it's nice like this.

That night something terrible happened, which started like this: they heard terrible screams coming from the street, and it was fourteen minutes past eleven o'clock at night by Momik's watch, and the shutters rolled open and the lights went on, and in his heart Momik felt uh-oh now the Beast is coming out of the cellar, and he hid under the covers, but it was a woman screaming, not a Beast, so he jumped out of bed, ran to the window, and raised the shutters, and Mama and Papa called from the other room to close the shutters, but he'd stopped listening to them a long time ago, and he looked out the window and saw a real live naked woman running up and down the street screaming terrible screams, and you couldn't understand her, and even though the moon was almost full, it took Momik a couple of minutes to see that it was Hannah Zeitrin, because her pretty blond wig had fallen, and her hair was bald underneath and she had great big breasts that were flopping all over, and it was a good thing she had on a kind of small, triangle thing, like black fur down below, and Hannah Zeitrin who only this afternoon had been sitting on the bench next to him like a good friend raised her arms and screamed in Yiddish: God, God, how long must I wait for you, God, and people started screaming, Quiet, go home and sleep, you're crazy, it's the middle of the night, and somebody on the second floor where the uppity young couple live threw a whole bucketful of cold water down and drenched her, but she didn't stop running and tearing out her hair, and when she ran under the streetlamp, you could see the makeup she always smears on her face dripping, and suddenly the lights went on at Bella's and wouldn't you know it, Bella ran down the stairs and hugged Hannah with a big blanket, and Hannah stood still at first, trembling a little from the cold with her head drooping

and Bella led her very slowly, but suddenly she stopped and shrieked, "Brutes!" and when she passed the house of the uppity couple she shrieked, "You're worse than they are! God will pay you double for this!" and then she and Hannah disappeared between the black cypress trees next to Hannah's house, and one by one the lights went out in all the houses, and Momik rolled down the shutters and went back to bed. But he had seen something no one else noticed, that while Hannah was running naked, Mr. Munin came out of the synagogue next door to Momik's and stood there, in the shadows but also a little in the moonlight. He wasn't wearing his glasses and his whole body jerked back and forth, and his eyes looked at Hannah and shone, and his hands were down in the darkness, and Momik saw his shoulders shake and his lips move, but he couldn't tell what he was saying though he had the feeling it was probably something very important, that Munin may have been revealing a great secret about the Beast and how to fight it, and Momik wanted to scream out the window, I can't hear you, but Munin's eyes suddenly popped open, and his mouth opened together with his eyes, and his body fell forward and backward as if somebody were shaking him with all his might, and then he raised his arms like a big black bird and started jumping and screaming, but without a voice, as if somebody above were pulling him up by a string, and suddenly the string broke and Munin fell down in a heap and lay there for a long time, and Momik could still hear him krechzing quietly to himself like the crazy cat for a long time after it was over, and in the morning Munin wasn't lying there anymore.

But the Beast knew it was a trick and it wouldn't come out. None of Momik's tricks was any use. The Beast could probably tell the difference between a real Jew and Momik suddenly trying to act like a Jew, and if Momik could tell the difference he'd do the right thing, but he doesn't. He's become like his own shadow lately, dragging his feet when he walks, and he has this new chendeleh, as Bella called it, krechzing like an old person, even at school, and everybody made fun of him, and the only good thing that happened around that time is that he came in fifth in his class in the sixty-meter dash, which never happened before, why now all of a sudden when he didn't have the strength to do anything, and everyone said he ran like Zatopek the Czech Locomotive, and they only laughed because he ran the whole race with his eyes shut tight and made faces as if a monster were after him, but at

least now they saw he could do it if he really wanted to, and even Alex Tochner who was a friend of his once for two weeks and Momik coached him every day in the Ein Kerem Valley till Alex broke the class record and made the team like nothing, even Alex came up to him and said, Nice going, Helen Keller, but even these words of praise made no difference to Momik.

Bill and Motl had disappeared long ago, and he couldn't bring them back. It was as if the Beast had frozen his brains, and everyone noticed now. Bella wouldn't answer his questions anymore, and when he pleaded with her she told him she could eat herself for the harm she'd done by telling him what she'd told him already, and that she'd had it up to here with his investigations, that he should go play with children his own age please, and she didn't say it in an angry way but pityingly, which is worse. His parents had also been giving him funny looks lately, and you could see that they were just waiting for a chance to explode because of him. They'd started acting really strange: first they cleaned the house like crazy, washing and scrubbing everything each day (including windows and panels), and there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere, but they just kept cleaning and cleaning, and one night when Momik got up to pee he saw that all the lights in the house were on and Mama and Papa were down on their knees scraping the cracks between the tiles with kitchen knives, and when they saw him they smiled like children caught red-handed, and Momik didn't say anything, and in the morning he pretended he'd forgotten. A few days later, on Saturday, Bella said something to Mama, and Mama turned white as this wall, and early Sunday morning Mama took Momik to the health clinic to see Dr. Erdreich who examined him thoroughly from head to toe and told Mama no no it wasn't the Disease, that's how they talk about polio, which in our country is contracted by several children each year even after vaccinations and shots, and the doctor prescribed vitamins and cod-liver oil twice a day, but nothing helped, how could it, and though Mama and Papa started eating bigger suppers than ever and forced Momik to swallow more and more food, they knew the child was breaking down before their very eyes, and that there was nothing they could do about it, they tried everything, you have to admit, they brought over a little bearded rabbi from Mea Shearim who rolled a hard-boiled egg all over Momik and whispered, and they even went to see Madame Miranda Bardugo who was practically the queen