

# PROLOGUE

*The year was 1980. Fifty-two Americans were being held hostage in Iran, and President Carter's efforts to rescue them were not successful.*

*Everybody was talking about the dumped chemicals poisoning Love Canal, Mount Saint Helens erupted, and in outer space, Voyager 1 reached Saturn.*

*George Brett was the American League Most Valuable Player and Hank Aaron hit his 715th home run. The Phillies beat the Kansas City Royals 4-2 in the World Series. Pittsburgh took the Super Bowl from the L.A. Rams; the Lakers were the N.B.A. champs; and the underdog U.S. hockey team surprised the world by winning the "gold" in the Winter Olympics.*

*Ronald Reagan got elected president . . . John Lennon of the Beatles was shot dead . . . I drove everyone nuts singing the Doobie Brothers hit "What a Fool Believes" night and day . . . and Zayda came to live with us.*

*Yes . . . most of all, when I think back to that fall of 1980, I remember Zayda . . . and I remember his arrival as though it were yesterday . . .*

CHAPTER

1

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*The Arrival*

It wasn't really cold anymore, just damp and raw, but I felt chilled and uneasy as I thought of what lay ahead. My cap was pulled down far over my ears and my wool jacket was zipped way up, but I was still uncomfortable—maybe not because of the weather, maybe because of my thoughts. Big things were about to happen in our house, and I didn't like it.

Brian, Josh, and good old Alan were horsing around in their usual way, and I would have been just as goofy on any other day—but today I had too much on my mind.

Finally the mud-splashed yellow bus rolled up to the curb and we all piled in for the trip home. There were lots of book bags slamming into ribs, legs tangling with other legs, and the collective noise was deafening; but there was nothing unusual about this. James, our regular driver, just stared straight ahead, too experienced to even try to quiet down the boys and girls. When the last one boarded, he growled, "Siddown and pipe down!" which he said every day, and we were off.

Brian asked me, "Hey, Bill, gonna meet us and shoot a few baskets later?"

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"If I can. Don't know what my mother has in mind. I don't know what to expect, you know, my grandfather and all that . . ."

"Oh, yeah," Josh said. "Today's the day, right?"

I just nodded. These were my good pals, but I just didn't feel like talking about it. Brian and Josh were having a contest—who could keep pencils up his nose the longest—and I would have found them pretty amusing on any other day; but today they looked like the idiots they really were. Alan was, of course, laughing like a hyena. I smiled but didn't have my heart in it. I just didn't want my grandfather, my zayda, moving in with us, and that's the truth.

I slammed the kitchen door and was just about to drop my jacket on the floor when Mom, without turning away from the sink, shouted, "Don't drop your jacket on the floor!"

Another eyes-in-the-back-of-her-head coup for Mom.

So I hung up my coat and headed straight for the refrigerator and the orange juice. Again Mom, without turning around, said, "Not out of the pitcher. Get a glass."

"Is he here yet? Is Dad here with him?"

Mom kept her eyes on the potatoes in the pot in the sink, went on peeling, and said, "Dad dropped Zayda off a couple of hours ago and went back to the store. I think Zayda is asleep in the living room. I haven't checked in the past hour, and it's pretty quiet in there."

"Should I take a look, or what?"

Now Mom wiped her hands on her apron, shut off the cold water, sighed deeply, turned around and sat down at the kitchen table. She motioned to me to join her.

For a minute or two she just sat there, pushing crumbs around on the plastic tablecloth. Then she said, "Look . . ."

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"Look," she began again, "this is going to be new and probably not too easy for all of us. Zayda has lived alone for many years and he will have just as hard a time getting used to us as the other way around. You know I was against it. I thought a nursing home would be better, certainly better for me; but, really, why am I going into this again? He's here and we'll just do what's necessary to make him feel comfortable and to not disrupt our lives too much. Go into the living room. If he's awake, give him a kiss and talk for a few minutes. Tell him about school. Whatever you like. If he's asleep, you can go out for the rest of the afternoon, but be home early, by five o'clock at the latest. Dad promised to be home around then, and I want us to have a nice family meal for a change. This is, I guess, an occasion. If you see Danny, make sure he comes home by five also."

Zayda is my father's father. He is old. I mean really, really old. Of course I love him. I love him the way any kid loves a very old relative he doesn't see too often. Zayda had taken care of himself in his own place ever since Bubbie died, which was quite a long time ago. In fact, I don't even remember her. Anyway, last winter Dad began getting phone calls in the middle of the night or, worse yet, in the middle of the workday. Zayda had left a burner on and set a small fire in his kitchen. Zayda had locked himself out of his apartment. Zayda had gone to buy a paper and gotten lost coming home. Stuff like that. Sometimes the calls came from Mrs. Zuckerman, who lived next door. Sometimes they came from Zayda himself. When the call came from the fire department, that was it. Mom and Dad knew they had to do something. They argued quite a bit. Once I heard, from behind their closed bedroom door, Mom's angry shouting, high-pitched and scary, and Dad repeating over and over, "But he's my father."

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Finally they agreed that the best thing for Zayda was for him to move in with us.

Now that day was here. Zayda, his cartons of books and papers and photos, his clothes, and all his stuff, were here.

Mom may not have been happy, but I have to hand it to her—she certainly put on a major spread that night. And Dad gave her such a warm, loving, thankful smile from across the room. Zayda's praise ("Rosie, I never had such pot roast in my life!") and Dad's gratitude seemed to melt her a little; and Danny and I looked at each other and thought that maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

We told Zayda about school and sports, and he asked me if I was preparing for my bar mitzvah. I told him, "Not yet," and that was about it. Mom cleaned up. Zayda played a couple of hands of pinochle with Dad. Danny and I did our homework in front of the TV and before we knew it the first day of "Life with Zayda" was over.

We got used to Zayda pretty quickly. He was quiet. He got up early, made his own cereal and coffee, read the newspaper, and, in nice weather, took a walk around the block. He watched TV in his own room. He davened at the dining room table. I found the sight of him kind of nice, leaning over his big prayer book with its marbled end papers and red-ribbon page marker, rocking back and forth, his Hebrew rising and falling in half-melodies, the gnarled, callused index finger of his left hand moving along the columns, his skull cap always a little off center, his right hand absentmindedly stroking his wrinkled brow. At those times, he had such a sweet look on his face, it kind of choked me up a little.

Sometimes he asked us what was new but he didn't really seem interested in our answers, and we learned to just say, "Nothing, 'Zayd,'" and he didn't ask anything else. The

big thing was, he was there, always there. I mean, you could be picking your nose or scratching yourself and think you were all alone and—whoa—there was Zayda. But where could he go? He was—like the ancient Israelites—a “stranger in a strange land,” so to speak, and I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. And I just knew he felt sorry for himself, too.

Sometimes I’d bring him a glass of tea. Yup, that’s right. A *glass* of tea. And he would hold a sugar cube between his teeth and sip the tea through it, the way, he said, they did it in the old days. Anyway, I’d bring him that tea and watch him sip at it, staring into space, and I’d wonder what he was thinking, not being able to imagine anything at all.

It was most difficult for Mom. She was constantly vacuuming and picking up crumbled newspapers, and cooking and washing up. Zayda would say to Mom, “Rosie, darling, you know what I miss so much? Herring!” (Or *kreplach*. Or *kasha varnishkes*. Or something else that sounded strange and hadn’t been made by anyone in our family in 50 years.) Sometimes Mom was good-natured about Zayda’s cravings, and in a day or two the requested food would appear on the table, but not always. Definitely not always. By the way, Mom hated being called “Rosie,” and, speaking of names, how about this? Zayda used to call me “Velvel.” That’s what I said. Velvel. Velvel is Yiddish for William.

“BILL. BILL!” I would shout. “My name is BILL!”

“Velvel, maybe they have a Yiddish paper at the store?”

Yeah, right. Well, the answer was no, the candy store near us did not sell Yiddish newspapers. Fortunately Dad solved that problem by getting Zayda a subscription, much to my relief.

My friends still came over sometimes, but Brian said Zayda “spooked” him, and I had to remind him that he,

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Brian, had the most annoying sister in the world, and at least Zayda didn't follow us around the house butting into our conversations. Alan liked Zayda because my mom left more cookies and cake out, and Alan couldn't resist a nosh—any nosh. Mostly we went to the other guys' houses, because one thing Zayda did not like, and he made that quite clear, was our music. We got sick and tired of hearing him shout, "Shut up the noise!"

Sometimes Zayda and Dad would talk about the news of the day. Dad would try to bring me into the conversations because he thought I was old enough to "care about more than myself," as he put it. Zayda had some pretty strong opinions, and he and Dad definitely did not agree on politics, but when the talk got around to other things I was pretty interested in what Zayda had to say. Once, when Dad was complaining about "those lazy hippies," Zayda came to their defense. "They don't understand the world," he said, "but they have good hearts and mean well. This business with the drugs is terrible, but all the talk about love, maybe they're on to something. How can love be bad?" Mom got into that conversation and, let me tell you, it was lively!

At other times Zayda would begin to tell us something, then just say, "Who wants to hear from an old man?"

Danny or I would shout, "I do, Zayd!"

But Zayda would just say, "Nah . . . too long ago."

One conversation I was getting tired of was Dad asking Zayda, "Pop, tell the boys about how you came to America."

Zayda always replied, "They wouldn't be interested." Pop and Zayda had this little conversation about a million times. Exactly the same way. Then one night something

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happened. Maybe Zayda got tired of Dad asking. Maybe Zayda just felt like it.

Actually, it started earlier in the day. Both Danny and I had gotten in trouble. Danny used a couple of really rude words while doing his homework. You can guess the words. And I had put some smelly, sweaty basketball shorts and socks on the new sofa in the sunporch, and Mom said that the upholstery would never recover and what was I thinking? . . . and where was my consideration? . . . and on and on . . .

So both of us were punished for the day. No television. We played Monopoly and Risk, read for a while, and then sulked until bedtime.

We were just lying in bed, talking about how short-tempered Mom seemed to be lately, when—surprise—Zayda walked into our room. “Walked” isn’t quite the word; “shuffled” is more like it. He sat down on the edge of my bed and asked if we would like to hear about when he was just a few years older than I was then and he had traveled across half the world—alone.

Zayda had never come into our room at night, so we were pretty surprised by his presence, let alone his offer. He didn’t wait for an answer. He closed his eyes, and, as if speaking in a dream, he just began.