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Goldmun Et al

By Sister Kathleen

Otto Goldmun first became aware of the small group of youngsters late one afternoon as he made his way back to his tailor shop. He had been to the local deli to buy some bagels and lox for his mid-day meals for the next few days.

What brought them to his attention was the fact that it was shortly before three in the afternoon and as far as he knew, it was a school day, being that it was only a Tuesday in late September, and though it was rather chilly, none of the children were wearing proper coats or hats, which he thought odd. Surely their parents would never send their children out in such cold weather without first seeing that they were warmly dressed.

Goldmun stopped and gazed absently at them for a moment. There were four of them, two boys, one

about eighteen or so, short and thin and blonde and the other slightly younger, a deep ebony colored black boy about seventeen, and two girls, one about seventeen or eighteen with pretty brown hair and the beginnings of her pending womanhood, and the youngest, who had bright auburn hair, was about eight or nine at most he estimated.

He spoke to the older boy. "Why are you kinder not in school?" he asked quietly.

The boy, seeing no malice nor danger in Goldmun's benign presence, spoke, "We don't have to go to no school, no how, no way, Mister."

The other three nodded their heads in total agreement.

Goldmun shook his head in disbelief. "But it is just Tuesday, and it is the law," he replied.

"Naw," the boy demurred, "that law don't mean us."

"That's for other kids," the littlest girl replied. "Not us."

"Where do you live and why do you not have warm jackets and hats and mittens?" he asked.

"We don't live nowhere," the older boy replied sadly. "We ain't got no homes and no one who wants to buy us coats and food and things like that there," he stated matter-of-factly.

"But. . . but. . . where do you live? And sleep? Where do you eat? What do you eat?"

"Sometimes, if we're lucky and they ain't too busy, we get to stay at the one of the Missions, except that they don't like us younger kids hanging around with the older bums, but they do feed us

from time to time. Usually we just sell what we got to get money to eat.”

“Why, what do you have?” Goldmun asked incredulously, “I see nothing of value.”

The boy drew himself up proudly even though he was blushing. “Like I said, Mister, we sell what we gots!” He glared defiantly at the older man.

For a moment, Goldmun misunderstood. Then, it dawned on him. “You mean you actually sell yourselves? Your bodies?” he gasped in shock.

“Yeah, so what?” the boy defended. “No one cares nothing about us and we do what we gots to do to get by,” he replied off-handedly.

Suddenly, a police cruiser turned into the street and like a will-o-the-wisp, the four just vanished into the shadows. Goldmun waved at the Police, shook his head and when they failed to reappear, continued down the street. The four children were still on his mind when he closed shop for the day.

One of his late afternoon customers, Jerrald Schumacher, had complained that he had been accosted by a gang of cut-throats that very afternoon not two blocks from Otto’s shop. Upon further questioning, Goldmun discovered that the “cut-throats” had been a wandering band of four younger children, two boys and two girls, who had stopped him to ask for money. Jerrald, being terrified out of his mind, having recently escaped the war and terror that was ravishing his homeland, had handed the oldest boy a ten dollar bill, after which they had run off. Goldmun realized that they were the same four he had seen earlier and he wondered why they had not asked him for money too.

Over the next few days, Goldmun heard stories of pilferage and break-ins of certain businesses, but no reports of anything of any great value being taken except for some cast-off clothing and food items. In fact, it seemed to Goldmun that most of the break-ins occurred on the colder nights and he deduced that whoever was doing the breaking and entering was merely seeking refuge from the worsening cold.

Strangely enough, Goldmun's shop was spared a break-in, partly because he lived up-stairs over his shop and many nights he just leaned back in his recliner chair in the rear of the shop, pulled an old woolen blanket over his body and slept right where he worked!

In his travels up and down the street, Goldmun saw the four children from time to time, but they would not let him get close enough to talk to them. Not that he had any pretensions of being a "do-gooder" nor a "child exploiter," rather he was concerned about their physical welfare. Goldmun knew well the feelings of being homeless and cold and hungry in a land where such people are ignored as a matter of course, those who were well-off having contemptuous, derisive thoughts regarding these "worthless," "lazy" bums who infested their orderly, well-fed, well-clothed and warm world!

Goldmun had been one of the homeless thousands after the Big War, and lived hand to mouth for some years, often going cold and hungry because there was nothing to be had for anyone. Goldmun had been just eight years old when the American Army had liberated his concentration camp and turned the former detainees loose on an already war-torn countryside. It wasn't until the late 1940's

that he had come under the purview of a U.S. reconstruction agency that had arranged for him to be apprenticed to a tailor, a German-Jew, who lived in the city of Berlin. Goldmun had proved to be a bright, apt student and the old German had hoped that his apprentice would take over someday when he was too old to work.

But, alas, the old man's fondest dreams were almost dashed when Goldmun, on his twenty-first birthday, had announced that he was migrating to the Land of Opportunity, where the streets were paved with gold and there was more food than could be eaten by any ten people! Beautiful women abounded in this Paradise, and Goldmun longed for a wife and children and a home above all else.

He was determined to emigrate to the United States!

Not to be denied, the old man had sold his business and accompanied Goldmun to the USA where he soon bought a tailor shop from an estate and they set up business there. When the old man died, he left the business to Goldmun who then began his quiet quest for the American Dream. Sophia Gutzmun soon became Mrs. Goldmun and in due time, she gave birth to their only child, a son they named "Otto" after Goldmun's late business partner.

With increasing prosperity came the last parts of Goldmun's dream - he bought a home in Levittown — a white with dark chocolate trim, two bedroom bungalow, with curtains at the windows and grass all around and a picket fence and a bar-be-que in the back-yard and a dog and best of all, it was only a short ride on the L.I.R.R. from his tailor shop!

Goldmun was content at last.

Until the day some years later that he arrived home only to find that there was no more home to come home to! Something to do with faulty electrical wiring had started the house on fire and it had then burned to the ground, taking Sophia, Little Otto, dog, bar-be-que, dreams and all with it!

Sick at heart, Goldmun had taken refuge in a whiskey bottle, barely rising out of the whiskey fumes long enough to keep going. He had finally joined AA and slowly dried himself out, remaining sober ever since. Having no other place to go, he had begun to live in his shop and had done so for some years before the beginning of this story.

One particularly cold night in mid October, Goldmun thought that he heard scuffling noises and muffled voices coming from his basement, but when he investigated, he found nothing, so he put it down to the rats that roamed the city. He tucked his wool blanket protectively around his body and went back to sleep. The next morning when he went to check his stash of bagels and lox, he discovered that someone, or something, had pilfered his last bagel! The crumbs on the floor told the story plainly. Whatever or whoever it was, they had eaten his last bagel and he was left with the crumbs!

Muttering, Goldmun made his way down the street to Max's deli where he purchased six more bagels and some more lox. As he was leaving, he stopped in front of the pastries counter where some fresh, fluffy cream-puffs cried out to him. Goldmun had always had a sweet tooth, especially for fresh, fluffy cream-puffs, so he splurged and bought two, intending to have one with his afternoon tea and the other for breakfast the next morning.

On the way back to his shop, he saw the four children digging through the dumpster behind the deli and he noticed that they were not quite so raggedy and thread-bare as they had been. Obviously they had found some sort of resource to furnish them with warmer clothing!

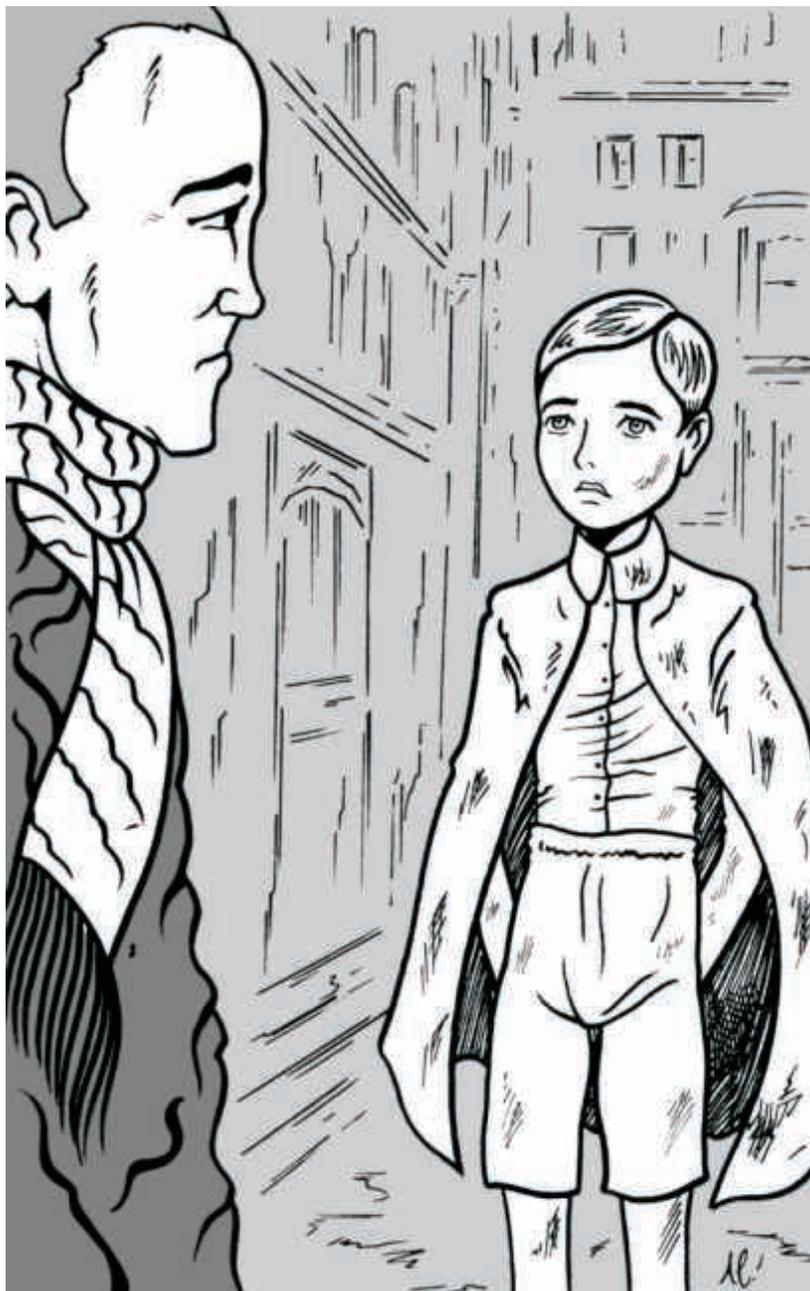
Goldmun gave them no more thought until the next morning when he discovered that not only was his cream-puff missing, but so were the five remaining bagels and all the lox! He felt angry for his loss, but then began to mull it over. 'Maybe the rats I hear aren't rats after all!' he thought. "Maybe the noises had been caused by cold children seeking warmth for the night!"

The thought made him angrier still. To think that four innocent children had to resort to such subterfuges in order to survive! To make it even worse, it reminded Goldmun of his own experiences when he had been "liberated" by the American troops.

As he was returning from the deli after having replenished his supply of bagels and lox and one more cream-puff, Goldmun saw the four running along the street with a mangy hound chasing them. He recognized the hound as belonging to the deli owner, a mean-spirited man named Max Buchmun who seemed to resent everyone. Picking up a stick from the gutter, Goldmun soon chased the dog away and took a look at them.

Immediately, from the powered sugar still clinging to her lips, he knew that his cream-puff had found its way into the hungry stomach of the younger girl and suddenly, he didn't regret its loss as much as he had.

“Ho, Liebchen,” he called in a friendly voice, “did you like my cream-puff?”



Startled, the little girl nodded before the others could stop her. "Yeah," she squeaked.

"Vunderbar!" Goldmun exclaimed jovially. "I have a surprise for you. How would you like another cream puff just like it?"

The little girl nodded eagerly. "I'd like it!" she grinned.

Wordlessly, Goldmun handed her the bag containing his cream-puff. "And, no sooner said than done! Here you are, Liebchen!"

"Gee, thanks, Mister," she replied, opening the bag and taking it out reverently. "No one never not ever gave me nothing like this before, not never!"

"And for the rest of you," Goldmun stated, "I have a bag of bagels and some fresh lox for all of us to enjoy!"

The older boy stepped forward. "What's the catch, Mister?" he demanded. "There ain't not no free rides and for damn sure no free lunches, th'out we gots to pay with sumthin'!"

Goldmun stared at the boy in shock. "Why. . . there is no catch, as you put it, my boy. I'm merely sharing my bagels and the lox so that you don't have to steal them from me tonight."

"We ain't not never stolen nothing from you no how, Mister," the boy denied heatedly.

"A quintuple negative!" Goldmun sighed. "Have you not been staying in my basement these past few nights? And have you not taken my bagels and lox and cream puff while I was fast asleep?"

"We found that stuff!" the boy declared stoutly.

“Yes, I have no doubt you did, in my small fridge!”

“We was hungry,” defiantly, doggedly.

“If you had asked, I would have shared,” Goldmun replied.

“Yeah, sure you would,” the boy sneered, “and I’m the Queen of the May!”

Goldmun laughed jovially. “Picture that!”

“Well, I am. . . er, I mean, I was. . . once. . .” he insisted.

“Was, what?” Now he had piqued Goldmun’s interest.

“Queen of the May,” the boy replied petulantly.

Goldmun stared at the boy, seeing the smooth, almost hairless body for the first time. In their past encounters, he had merely seen a dirty faced, ragged boy child in great need. Now that he had accepted the boy as an individual, he was surprised at his new observation.

He saw a seventeen or eighteen year old boy, scarcely five feet nothing tall, just skin and bones, barely tipping the scales at a hundred pounds, if that, with dirty, scraggly, ash-blond hair, clear, blue eyes, a sprinkling of freckles across his slightly retrousée nose, his bee-stung lips full and sensuous, his teeth in dire need of brushing and God knew what else! Had Goldmun not known otherwise, he could easily have taken the boy for a teen aged girl, and a very pretty one at that!!

“So?” Goldmun raised his eyebrows questioningly. “Are you going to tell me about it or are you just going to leave me wondering?”

“It was April a year ago when my Mom was still alive. They were having a block party in honor of May Day, and Mom and I got the idea of entering the contest. The first prize was a hundred dollars and God knows, we sure needed it!”

“I heard about it,” Goldmun admitted sadly, “but I was unable to go myself. I hear it was a great success. Mr. Soong’s daughter, Mai Lei, was an entrant and she was awarded second prize. Mr. Soong talked about it for days after!”

“Oh, I remember an oriental girl who was dressed as a harem slave who got second prize. Was that her?” he asked.

“The very one,” Goldmun agreed.

“Well, we worked on our costumes and when I was dressed, I looked just like a girl! Mom was so happy. I had never seen her so happy before. She told me that ever since she was a little girl that she had wanted a daughter to love, but that I came along instead. But, she always told me that she loved me and wouldn’t trade me for anything!

“On the day of the contest, I was chosen as a finalist and got to ride in the Prince’s carriage with the Fairy Prince over on Second Avenue! At the final judging, I was chosen as Queen and given the first prize check for a hundred dollars.”

“I just wish I could have gone! I would have loved to see you in your pretty costume with your Prince Charming,” Goldmun remonstrated. “What did you buy with the money?”

“Mom used it to pay the rent on our flat.

“And after that, I dressed up for her frequently and she and I made lots of costumes for me to wear for her.”

He stopped, tears glistening as they slid unchecked across his creamy cheeks.

“Then what happened,” Goldmun asked, touched deeply.

“This last July, Mom came down with some kind of disease and died on the charity ward at Bellevue. The landlord kicked me out and I didn’t not have no where else to go.”

Goldmun was shocked. “Didn’t you keep anything? I mean, like shoes, warm coats, mittens, underwear?” he asked.

The boy shook his head. “Naw, the guy wouldn’t not let me take nothing. Said he was keeping it all for the back rent,” he explained.

“Why. . . why. . .” Goldmun stammered, “that’s heartless and illegal!”

“Yeah, well, he did it anyway. Law don’t mean nothing much around here.”

“Who was this heartless wretch?” Goldmun demanded.

“Mr. Naish Scronzainnia on Pearl Street, the second hand store owner.”

“Ah, yes, I know him well. . .” Goldmun mused. “I shall look into it.”

“Yeah, you do that,” the boy replied sarcastically.

“In the meantime, would the four of you like to dine with me? We will go to Soongs’, the Chinese restaurant next to my store and have a decent meal. Mr. Soong is the harem girl’s father.” he explained.

“What’s the catch?” the older boy asked again, skeptically.

“Goldmun started in surprise. “Why, no catch, like I told you before.”

“G’wan! No body gives out free meals without they wants something in return,” the boy exclaimed angrily. “Don’ try ta snow us, old man!”

“My dear boy,” Goldmun replied, stung by his sharp words, “believe it or not, there was a time in my early life when I too was cold and hungry and desperate for. . .”

“Bull crap!” the boy snorted skeptically.

“Yes, young man, after the German pogroms of the late War, I was captured and made a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp and I still have the scars and the tattoo to prove it!” He pushed up his one sleeve to show the black number tattooed on the front of his forearm. They looked at it in awe.

“After the war in Europe, I was a homeless refugee. I had no parents, no home, no relatives and no resources until the Army helped me and I was apprenticed to a tailor in Berlin. I eventually came to America with mine partner and we bought our own shop. When my mentor died, I inherited the tailor shop. Then, I got married, had a beautiful wife and a handsome son, a nice home out in Levittown, a dog, grass to mow, the whole ball of wax! We were very happy there, Sophia and I.”

“So, what happened? We know you stay in your shop all the time.”

“Fire. It took everything,” Goldmun replied laconically.

“Gee, Mister, the older girl interjected, “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Goldmun replied, wiping a tear from his eye. After a moment, he went on, “First of all, my name is Otto Goldmun but everyone calls me just plain Goldmun.”

“OK, Mr. Goldman,” the girl agreed.

“No, no, not Goldman, Goldmun. Means the same thing, I suppose, but I much prefer the latter spelling. However, I will answer to either from those who do not know any different.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. . . er, Goldmun, I didn’t not know.”

Goldmun smiled. “You know, you almost gave poor Mr. Schumacher a heart attack the other day.” He saw the puzzlement in their eyes. “You know, the man who gave you the ten dollar bill.”

“Oh, him,” the boy acknowledged. “All we wanted was a few bucks to buy some food.”

“I know that,” Goldmun admitted, “but poor Mr. Schumacher didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, I guess we did look kinda scarey. . .” the boy admitted with a shy grin.

“And it is almost Halloween,” Goldmun reminded.

“Yeah, big deal.”

“Also,” Goldmun continued, “why did you run when the police car came down the street the other day? You had done nothing wrong and there was no reason to be afraid of them.”

“Yeah, well, you, maybe, but they hassle us because we’re street kids,” the older boy explained with disgust.

“Hassle?”

“Yeah, we’ve been run in three or four times and it’s a bitch getting loose from The City welfare people!” he muttered as they neared Goldmun’s block.

“Ah, here we are. Now remember, Mr. Soong is a very traditional Chinese gentleman and he likes his customers to be polite and appreciate his wife’s cooking. So please, be on your best behavior.”

They entered and Goldmun seated them all at a large table near the kitchen from which wafted the most delicious smells. The other customers pretended not to notice the shaggy appearance of the small group. A very short Asian man approached them hesitantly. “Are you sure you’re. . .” Then he caught sight of Goldmun in the gloom of the room. “Ah, so, Goldmun! I have not seen you in some time.”

Mr. Soong and Goldmun were close friends and partners of a sort. While each man maintained his own business and holdings, both collaborated in many of their investments and had become very wealthy men as a result. However, neither boasted of his success and were seldom bothered by those human leeches who are always sniffing around money. They shared an avid interest in chess and had been chess opponents for many years.

“Are these children relatives of yours, Goldmun?” he asked gently.

Goldmun nodded. “Why, yes, they are my nieces and nephews from the old country and it has been a long time since we have last visited. They have just arrived in the city today.”

Mr. Soong nodded, recognizing the four from many forays into his dumpster. “Ah, so.” He bowed

politely. "And what would you like to eat today, please?" he asked pleasantly.

"Mr. Soong," Goldmun broke in, "just bring us enough food for five hungry persons and use your own judgment about what you bring."

Mr. Soong smiled wisely and bowed anew. "Ah, so, and so shall it be done!" Turning, he clapped his hands and a tiny, smiling Asian girl appeared. She carried a large tea pot and five small, handleless cups on a tea tray. She placed a cup before each of them, curtsayed and poured tea for each of them. Goldmun took a sip and sighed with contentment.

"Ah, nectar of the Gods, Liebchen!"

The girl smiled, curtsayed anew and disappeared into the kitchen.

Mr. Soong nodded at the tea cups. "Is from China!" he smiled, as if that explained everything.

"Wow!" the older boy whispered. "This is good!"

"Have you ever had Chinese food before?" Goldmun asked.

He nodded. "Yes, in my old neighborhood there was a place where Mom and I used to go from time to time. It served very good food!"

"OK, children," Goldmun began seriously. "I want to know each one of your names and I would like each one of you to tell me a little about yourself." He sat back, waiting.

"All right," the first boy began. "First of all, my name is Johann Watson and I will be seventeen years old next month. I don't go to school because I don't have a permanent address. As far as I know, I have no close relatives in The City, nor would I live with them if I did!" He crossed his arms across his

chest belligerently. "I been living on the streets since July because I gots no place else to go to and live. So there!"

Goldmun nodded and turned to the older girl. "My dear?" he prompted.

"OK, my name is Kathleen Snyder. . . er. . . Smith and my step-father kicked me out in July because I wouldn't let the dirty s.o.b. have another piece of my ass! God, I would rather have died than submit to that bastard again! I hit him with a baseball bat! Knocked him out cold! I thought I had killed him, but I didn't. Damn the luck!" she cursed. "Anyway, when he complained about me to the cops, they arrested him for rape and he was sent up-state. He's in a maxey-max joint now. Good riddance, I say. It serves the old bastard right! I'm glad he's in jail! I hope they keep him there for a hundred years!"

"And where was your Mother and Father all this time?" Goldmun asked, shocked.

"Mom died in June and my Father took off long before I was born. Anyway, I will be eighteen the day before Thanksgiving and I hate living in the street!" She lowered her head and Goldmun could see her shoulders shaking.

He turned to the black boy. "And you?"

"My old man named me Jerome J. Jerome. The 'J.' stands for Jerome. The old man had a weird sense of humor. I'm going on sixteen years old and I can't live with the old man and his girl friends because I am in their way. So here I am."

"How long have you been in the street?" Goldmun asked gently.

"Since last June," was the choked reply.

Goldmun turned to the smallest girl. “And you, Liebchen?”

“I don’t want to talk about it!” she declared as she started to cry, her tears leaving long streaks down her dirty cheeks.

Kathleen broke in. “Her name is Darling Joy March and she’s only eight years old. Her Mom’s boy friend raped her repeatedly all last spring and early summer and when she complained to her Mom’s social worker, he was arrested and sent to prison Up-State. He’s in the same joint as my step-father. Her Mom insisted that it was all Darling Joy’s fault and told her to get out in late August.”

“My good God!” Goldmun exclaimed. “Such horrible people there are in this world!”

Darling Joy nodded in confirmation.

“Are you all right now, child?” Goldmun asked, concerned.

Kathleen and Darling Joy nodded in unison.

“Yeah. . . sort of. . .” Kathleen added, then would say no more.

They looked up as Mr. Soong appeared with several steaming bowls. The girl returned with some smaller bowls and soup-spoons which she placed before each of them. Mr. Soong ladled soup into the bowls and when the girl had placed warmed plates before each of them, he dished up piles of steaming meat and vegetables. The girl refilled their tea cups, curtsied and stepped back.

Mr. Soong hovered over them like a mother hen until each had sampled his fare. Then, as smiles of enjoyment wreathed their faces, he grinned and retired.

“Hey, not bad!” Johann exclaimed. “It’s better than I remembered.”

“I ain’t never had nothing like this before,” Kathleen admitted, “but it’s darn good!

“Yeah,” Jerome murmured, his spoon working overtime to keep up with his swallows!

“Here, here, slow down, Jerome!” Goldmun exclaimed, laughing. “I promise you, if we manage to eat all this, Mr. Soong has gallons more in his kitchen! Besides, if you fill up on soup, you will have no room for the meat and vegetables!” After a moment, he added, “Nor for Chinese ice cream dessert!”

Jerome blushed and looked up. “I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I was hungry.”

Darling Joy smiled and giggled as she ate daintily, obviously enjoying every bite.

And as soon as they had emptied one dish, Mr. Soong or his daughter reappeared with a new one, a full one, to tempt their appetites.

Goldmun finally pushed his plate back and sat back in his chair. “Oy, vey! I don’t know about the rest of you, but I am stuffed like a Thanksgiving turkey!” he boasted.

“Me too!” Darling Joy exclaimed. “And it feels good!”

“It sure does,” Kathleen admitted, sitting back and patting her full stomach.

“Yeah, better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick!” Johann laughed.

“Amen to that!” Goldmun agreed with a smile.

Jerome, however, continued eating steadily and Goldmun wondered where he was putting it all.

“You must have two hollow arms and four hollow legs!” he told the grinning boy who kept right on eating.

“The boy is just hungry after all his travels,” Mr. Soong laughed as he ladled more meat and vegetables onto Jerome’s plate and refilled his tea cup.

“I’d like a bit more of that tea, Mr. Soong,” Goldmun sighed. “It is so delicious!”

“Is from China!” Mr. Soong emphasized again, as if that explained everything!

Darling Joy was beginning to nod sleepily like all small animals do when their little tummies are completely full. She leaned over and laid her head atop Goldmun’s thigh, asleep before her head was all the way down.

Dessert was finally served and three of the four children swallowed it all greedily, their spoons scraping the bottoms of the bowls to capture that last bit of delicious sweetness.

Goldmun looked at the three children, then asked, “Well, what am I to do with you? It is quite obvious that I cannot just turn you loose to roam the streets and get yourselves into more trouble stealing my bagels and lox, so I guess you shall just have to come home and live with me.”

“Hey, wait just a minute there,” Johann exclaimed. “What’s the catch, Goldmun?” he demanded. “No body takes in no body for nothing! What do you want from us?”

Goldmun looked at him in surprise. “My dear Johann, I want nothing from any of you. I just want to help you in the same way that I would have liked to have been helped when I was in similar straits in

my youth, and that's the truth. Come on, what do you say? Believe me, I really have no ulterior motive and you certainly have nothing to lose."

"What's that? Ul-teer-e-or. . . motive?" he asked, shaking his head in bewilderment.

"It means that there is no catch and that I neither want nor expect anything from any one of you in return. I just want to help, that's all," Goldmun confessed, blushing slightly.

"Well, OK," Johann agreed skeptically, "but no funny stuff or out we go!"

"Agreed," Goldmun smiled as he awakened Darling Joy. He paid Mr. Soong and they went next door to the tailor shop. Inside, an old tabby cat rubbed up against Goldmun's leg and meowed in hunger.

"Oh, dear," Goldmun exclaimed, "I completely forgot about Horatio!"

"Horatio?" Darling Joy asked, kneeling and petting the cat's back gently.

"Yes, it's from Shakespeare, you know," he explained.

"Who's Shakespeare?" the little girl asked, puzzled.

"He was some writer way back in the day," Kathleen explained.

"Oh," the girl agreed, promptly forgetting all about Shakespeare. "Can I feed Mr. Horatio, Mr. Goldmun?" she asked innocently.

"Yes," he agreed, nodding. "You will find cans of his favorite food in the cabinet and an opener on the shelf up above."

Darling Joy scrambled to get the can open and soon Horatio was eating contentedly as the little girl petted him affectionately.

Goldmun looked on fondly. “Darn cat!” he muttered. “Lives the life of ease, and while the rest of us have to work for a living, he just lays around, catches a mouse now and then and gets fatter and fatter. Now I ask you, what’s wrong with this picture?”

“But he’s only a cat!” Darling Joy commented sagely. “What does he know?”

Goldmun smiled. “Exactly!”

“Well, I don’t see why he has to work anyway,” she concluded, petting him anew.

“Johann, you mentioned something about making and sewing some costumes with your Mother. Do you like to sew?” Goldmun asked.

Johann nodded eagerly. “Yeah, I sure do!” he exclaimed excitedly.

“How would you like to work with me and learn how to be a tailor?”

“Nah, you only make men’s things and I only like making girls’ stuff.”

Goldmun laughed. “My boy, sewing is sewing. If you can sew for one sex, you can sew for the other. All it takes is training and patience and lots of practice. Myself, I worked for a tailor in Berlin when I was a boy about your age and he catered to both men and women, as I do to this day. I always make the clothes I am paid to make and the quality of my work is the same whether for a man or for a woman. And so it would be for you while you are learning. When you have progressed to the status of Master

Craftsman, you can work for which ever you choose. But first, you must learn the fundamentals, the tricks of the trade, as it were. Only then can you specialize.”

Johann nodded. “I never thought of it that way before,” he admitted.

“Well, give it a try and I shall pay you for your work which will allow you to look after your little brood.”

“I’ll have to think it over,” Johann mused.

“You do that, my boy,” Goldmun agreed, shaking the boy’s out-stretched hand.

“Could I learn too, Goldmun?” Kathleen asked shyly.

Goldmun looked at her in surprise, his mouth wreathing into a wide grin. “But of course, child,” he enthused. “But, there is one condition. . . .”

“I knew it!” Johann snorted. There’s always a catch.”

“Yes, you must go back to school and learn all you can while you can! If nothing else, you must graduate high school!”

“Go to school?” the four echoed in disbelief.

“Go to school,” Goldmun affirmed.

“Naw, we don’t wanna do that!” Johann demurred. “We don’t need no school no way!”

“Tell me Johann, can you convert yards to meters or millimeters to inches? Can you convert pounds and ounces to grams and kilograms? Do you know the difference between American clothing sizes and European clothing sizes as opposed to Japanese or Chinese sizes? Which is worth more, a pound of sil-

ver or a pound of platinum? Who makes the best fabrics and how do you tell? Can you convert dollars to euros or yens? Hmmm? Riddle me that!"

"Maybe I don't know none of that stuff, but so what?" Johann demanded.

"Johann," Kathleen interjected, "I think what Goldmun means is that we have to learn about what we are doing in order to do it with any kind of expertise!"

"Exactly!" Goldmun agreed.

"Yeah, I guess. . . maybe. . . makes sense. . ." the boy was half convinced.

"Makes sense to me," Jerome admitted.

"Yeah, I wouldn't not mind going back to school," Darling Joy admitted shyly. "I kind of miss going. . . now."

"All right then," Goldmun smiled. "Shall we put you in the up-stairs bedrooms or would you rather sleep in the cellar with the rest of the rats?" he teased.

Darling Joy shuddered. "If it's all the same with you, Mr. Goldmun," she quavered shyly, "I'd just as soon sleep up-stairs away from the rats!"

"Fine! Follow me!" And Goldmun led the four of them up the back stairs and into his vacant home. There were two bedrooms and Goldmun decided to put both girls in his old bedroom and the two boys into the smaller one, the one with bunk beds.

"Hey! Neato!" Jerome cried. "I call dibs on the top bunk!"

"Suits me," Johann replied, laughing shyly.