

## A MIRACLE FOR MARCI

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**M**arci pushed aside her English textbook, and stretching her arms high over her head, gazed out of the kitchen window. She had lived in the United States for eleven months now, and in Fairlawn for eight, and the garden in the courtyard of their apartment complex still looked strange to her. It was nothing like the park across the street from their building in Minsk in the Soviet Union. There she had played with her friends and walked with Mama and Papa and Alex after dinner and on Sundays. Here, you never saw anyone walking for pleasure, just people out with their dogs or getting their exercise.

Of course, here they had a car, even though Mama complained that it wouldn't last the winter, and Alex had a chance to go to the best college. It didn't matter that he was Jewish; it only mattered that he was smart. That was why he studied all the time, and why he got to have the small bedroom. Marci had to sleep on the couch, but she didn't mind. She could get up very early on Saturday mornings and watch cartoons on their small TV.

Marci watched as a bulky shape very slowly and cautiously descended the few steps to the sidewalk. Mrs. Gold, the elderly woman who lived in the next apartment, was going out to walk her old dog, Trixie. Marci liked them both; Mrs. Gold was the only person she saw regularly in the courtyard.

Marci glanced quickly at the clock on the wall. It was only four-thirty. She had time to talk to Mrs. Gold before she had to put the soup on to warm. She slid into her coat and gloves and grabbed a scarf on the way out the door. "Mrs. Gold," she called. "Wait. I'll walk with you."

"Why, hello, Masha. How nice to have company!" Mrs. Gold smiled warmly. She wasn't much taller than Marci. "What happened to your beautiful blond braids? You have a new hairdo."

"Mama's girlfriend Vera cut them and gave me a perm." Marci patted her crimped hair. "Do you think I look good?" she asked shyly.

Mrs. Gold put a gloved hand around her shoulder and squeezed. "You look very fashionable, very American."

Marci took a deep, happy breath. “And call me Marci, not Masha.”

Mrs. Gold laughed. “What are you doing for Hanukkah, Marci? Any big plans?”

Marci was quiet for a moment. She had heard kids in her class talking about Hanukkah since the beginning of December. They seemed very excited about all the gifts they expected. When she had asked about it at home, Mama had said she thought she remembered some sort of Jewish holiday when she would get money as a gift, but she wasn’t sure. Anyway, they were so busy at the discount store where she worked that she didn’t have the time or energy to prepare for any holiday. And Marci knew that there was no extra money for presents. Besides, Alex had said that he wasn’t interested in Jewish holidays. Being a Jew had already cost him his spot at the Polytechnic Institute in Minsk, and that was quite enough.

Marci looked down at her shoes. “I don’t know, Mrs. Gold. What are you supposed to do on Hanukkah?”

They stopped walking to wait for Trixie, who had sat down to rest. “You don’t know? Oy, what a shame!” Mrs. Gold clucked sympathetically.

“It’s different in the Soviet Union,” Marci explained. “No one talks about being Jewish. It’s as if it’s a terrible secret that you can’t let anyone know.”

“Well, during Hanukkah here,” Mrs. Gold explained, “you light candles and you sing songs, and you play with a spinning top called a dreidel. And you eat latkes, potato pancakes, of course, with applesauce or sour cream. And someone tells the story of what happened to the Maccabees long ago. When I was young, all the children got coins, Hanukkah gelt, but now I think they get presents. I still give my grandchildren money, though.”

“It sounds like a party,” said Marci, smiling.

They began to walk again, and Mrs. Gold leaned on Marci for support. “That’s what people do,” Mrs. Gold nodded. “Jewish people, Marci, like you.”

Marci imagined being at a party, all the people laughing and singing. Candles would be burning, and Papa and Alex would be trying to beat each other at chess. Marci would read the story of Hanukkah. And everyone there would be happy to be Jewish.

Marci looked seriously at the old woman. “Will you help me, Mrs. Gold, to make a party for my family? A real Hanukkah party?”

“Of course, I’ll help! It would be my pleasure. Now, let’s see – you’ll need a menorah and candles, a book that tells the story, a dreidel, and what else...”

While Mrs. Gold thought, Marci figured quickly in her head. It would cost a lot of money to buy all those things, and she didn’t have any money. She certainly couldn’t ask Mama or Alex. She wanted the party to be a surprise, a Hanukkah gift for her family. She would have to earn the money somehow.

“I need a job, Mrs. Gold. Could I walk Trixie for you now that it’s cold? She likes me.” Marci bent down quickly to pet the old dog. She hoped Mrs. Gold wouldn’t be angry.

“What a wonderful idea! If you could walk Trixie twice a day, and me once a day, I’ll be happy to pay ten dollars a week. How’s that?” Mrs. Gold asked.

“Oh, that’s too much! Mama will be angry.”

“Your mother doesn’t have to know. She goes to work around seven, right? You can walk Trixie in the morning after she leaves and when you come home from school. Is it a deal?” Mrs. Gold stuck out her hand.

Marci took it and shook it vigorously, just as people did at home. “It’s a deal.”

Marci had been walking Trixie and Mrs. Gold for two weeks, and she had saved all of the twenty dollars. She folded the money carefully and put it in her pocket. Today, she and Mrs. Gold were walking to town to buy all the things they needed for the party. Tomorrow night was the first night of Hanukkah.

“Mrs. Gold, are you ready?” Marci called through the door impatiently.

The door opened. Mrs. Gold was pinning her hat to her hair. “I’m coming, I’m coming. I can’t move as fast as you.”

Mrs. Gold locked the door and tucked her arm through Marci’s. Slowly, they began the six-block walk to town. “We’ll go to that *taleisim gesheft* first – that’s a Jewish bookshop. They should have a menorah, candles, and a book about Hanukkah. Then we’ll stop at the grocery and get applesauce and sour cream. You said you had potatoes, no?” Mrs. Gold asked.

“Oh yes, we always have potatoes. We eat them every night,” Marci answered.

“Good. I have everything I need to make *kichel*, Hanukkah cookies, tomorrow before my grandson picks me up. I even have a cookie cutter shaped like a dreidel. The potato pancakes you made in my apartment for practice were perfect. So we’re all set.”

When Marci saw the line of shops, her heart began to beat more quickly. It seemed as if it were taking them forever to get to town.

Finally, they stopped in front of a small store with many books in the window. There were silver and brass objects and banners of shiny fabric. Everything was covered with strange markings, letters that Marci didn’t recognize. “Come, darling, let’s go in,” Mrs. Gold said.

Marci felt shy and hesitant. She didn’t know what any of the things in the shop window were or what the strange letters meant. She wouldn’t know what to ask for, and everyone in the shop would think she was foolish. Maybe she had made a

mistake in wanting to give a Hanukkah party. “I don’t know, Mrs. Gold. Maybe we should go home. In the Soviet Union, being a Jew only brought trouble.”

Mrs. Gold shook her head, suddenly serious. “In America, Marci, we can believe whatever we want, as long as we don’t bother other people or keep them from following their own beliefs.” Her voice softened. “Now you have a chance to find out how lucky you are to be a part of the Jewish faith. Come, I’ll help you find everything you need.”

Taking a deep breath of cold evening air, Marci pulled open the door. Soon, she was deciding between a wooden or brass menorah, a dreidel filled with chocolates that didn’t spin very well or one without candy that spun for a full thirty seconds, a blue-and-white or a multicolored “Happy Hanukkah” banner, napkins with pictures of dreidels or a decorated tablecloth made of paper.

“So, young lady,” said the man behind the counter. “What will it be?”

Marci clutched the money in her pocket tightly. “I want the wooden menorah, this dreidel without the candy, the tablecloth, and this sign.”

“And put in a box of candles,” Mrs. Gold added.

The man gathered all the items together and went to the cash register. “That’s \$16.73.”

Marci let out her breath in relief. She had enough for applesauce and sour cream, too.

It was when they were leaving the grocery that Marci remembered. “Mrs. Gold, we didn’t buy a book, a book that tells about the holiday!”

“Oy vay! You’re right. And now all the money is gone.”

Marci’s thoughts raced. Where could she get a book? If they couldn’t read about what had happened to the Jews thousands of years ago, it wouldn’t be a real Hanukkah party. No one in her family would understand what they were celebrating.

Marci looked at her watch. It was already five-twenty. “We could go to the library, Mrs. Gold. Mama and Papa don’t get home until six.”

“That’s a good idea, Marci, but you go by yourself. I’ll never make it that far. I’m already tired, and it’s getting cold.”

Marci hesitated. She could get to the library and home if she ran all the way. But what about Mrs. Gold? It was dark, and she didn’t walk steadily without help. Marci had promised to take Mrs. Gold for a walk each day, and this was today’s walk. She couldn’t just leave her.

“No, it doesn’t matter. Let’s go home together.”

It seems to Marci that Mrs. Gold gave a sigh of relief as she took her arm, but Marci was too miserable to care much. Her parents and Alex and Vera would eat the potato pancakes and the cookies shaped like dreidels, but they wouldn’t know why

and Marci wouldn't be able to explain. She'd never remember what to say when she lit the candle, or the name of the bad king, or when it happened, or where. Her family would have a good time, but it wouldn't be special. It wouldn't be a Hanukkah party.

Marci added the last of the latkes to the tray in the oven and checked the clock. Vera would be arriving soon. Mama and Papa were coming home at the usual time, and Alex had promised to be back from the library.

She looked around to make sure that everything was ready. The menorah with one candle in the middle and one at the end was sitting on top of the TV, with the dreidel right next to it. Marci had tacked the banner over the kitchen door so everyone would be sure to see it. The tablecloth was spread, and the table set. Everything looked pretty, but Marci felt as if a stone were sitting on her chest, making it hard to breathe. If only she'd remembered to buy the book, she'd have been glad to use a plain tablecloth.

The knock at the door startled Marci. Could that be Vera already?

When she opened the door, she saw Mrs. Gold holding a plate full of dreidel-shaped cookies and a wrapped package. "I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier, Marci, but my grandson just arrived, and he was bringing me something I needed. Here are the cookies, and here is something special for you. Go on, open it. I have to go in a minute."

Marci took the plate of cookies and placed it on the table. Then she turned her attention to the package. Her first Hanukkah present! What could it be?

Marci untied the ribbon and pulled apart the paper. She gasped when she saw the book. "It's the Hanukkah story! Now I can have a real Hanukkah party."

Mrs. Gold laughed and gave Marci a quick hug. "You can tell me all about it when I come home and we go for our walk."

Just then, Marci's mother came into the living room. "Mashinka, what's this? Something smells delicious, and the table is so fancy."

"We're having a party, Mama, because tonight is a Jewish holiday," Marci said, "and we're Jews."

"Have a wonderful time," Mrs. Gold called back to them as she hurried out the door. "And a happy, happy Hanukkah!"