Milkweed

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JERRY SPINELLI

As a child, Jerry Spinelli wanted to be either a cowboy or a professional baseball player. In high school, however, he stumbled upon writing as a future career path when his poem about a championship football game was published in a local paper. He majored in English at Gettysburg College and also took writing seminars at Johns Hopkins University. After writing four unpublished novels for adults, he once again found his path by accident when one of his stories caught the attention of a children's publisher. As a result, *Space Station Seventh Grade* came out in 1982, and from then on, Spinelli wrote exclusively for kids. In 1990, *Maniac Magee* won the Newbery Medal. Spinelli now lives in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, in the Philadelphia metro area. He and his wife, Eileen, had six children together, and they now have over 20 grandchildren.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events of *Milkweed* are set in Warsaw, which was home to Poland's largest Jewish population. (Warsaw's Jewish community was actually the largest in Europe at the time and second only to New York City's in the world.) German troops invaded Poland at the beginning of World War II in September, 1939, with Warsaw falling to the troops by the end of that month. Later that year, Jewish people in Warsaw were required to wear armbands identifying them as such. In October, 1940, an enclosed and guarded ghetto was established in which the city's 400,000 Jewish residents were forced to live. The ghetto was only 1.3 square miles, and an average of 7.2 people had to live in single rooms. With this extreme overcrowding, infectious disease and starvation led to 83,000 deaths between 1940 and 1942; smuggling sustained many lives during that period. During the summer of 1942, 265,000 residents of the ghetto were deported to the Treblinka extermination camp. Though it doesn't appear in the novel, the Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1943, which utilized smuggling and homemade weapons, successfully resisted Nazi forces for several weeks.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *Milkweed*, Jerry Spinelli's other children's books, including *Stargirl* (2000) and *Maniac Magee* (1990), often feature quirky protagonists of uncertain origin who do acts of kindness for others. Australian author Morris Gleitzman's 2005 children's novel about a Polish orphan, *Once*, was inspired by historical figure Janusz Korczak, who also appears in *Milkweed*. Other well-known works set during the Holocaust include Lois Lowry's children's novel *Number the Stars* (1989) and the autobiographical *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Milkweed
- **When Published:** 2003
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel; Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Warsaw, Poland during World War II
- **Climax:** Misha is shot by a Nazi soldier.
- **Antagonist:** Hunger; the Nazis
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Real-Life Hero. The character of Doctor Korczak is based on a historical person, Janusz Korczak (the pen name of Henryk Goldszmit). Korczak was an educator and orphanage director who, though offered sanctuary, refused to leave the nearly 200 orphans in his care and was killed along with them at the Treblinka concentration camp in 1942.

Roma Heritage. Though protagonist Misha's origins aren't certain, it's implied in the novel that he is a "Gypsy." While this term is now considered an ethnic slur, at the time the novel is set, it simply meant that he would have been descended from the nomadic Roma people. This ethnic group originated in Northern India in the first millennium C.E. and spent centuries journeying across and settling throughout Eastern Europe, often working as craftsmen and horse dealers. Roma were one of the ethnic groups targeted for extermination during the Holocaust, with up to 250,000 estimated to have been killed.

PLOT SUMMARY

Stopthief's earliest memory is of running, clutching a loaf of bread to his chest. Someone is chasing him, shouting, "Stop! Thief!"

One day, just before the German invasion of Warsaw, Poland in 1939, a red-haired teenager named Uri grabs Stopthief, a younger boy, as they're both trying to steal from the same lady on the street. Sirens are wailing, and the kid warns Stopthief about "Jackboots" (Nazi soldiers). Uri introduces himself and takes Stopthief to a stable filled with other street kids. The orphan boys tease Stopthief about his small size and obliviousness to the world around him, and they speculate that

he must be either Jewish or, more likely, a "Gypsy" (a term for the Roma people, now considered to be an ethnic slur). Uri, who's taken a liking to Stopthief, brings him home to his hideout in the cellar of an abandoned barbershop.

As Nazi "Jackboots" occupy Warsaw and begin to oppress and humiliate Polish Jews, Stopthief naïvely fails to grasp the soldiers' cruelty; he admires their shiny boots and thinks that the soldiers like him. Uri tries to teach Stopthief to avoid Nazis and to be discreet when he goes out stealing food, but Stopthief often defies him, making Uri angry and violent toward him. Nevertheless, Uri is fond of the boy and gives him the name Misha Pilsudski. He also makes up a history for Misha, saying he's from a huge "Gypsy" family that traveled the countryside in a wagon caravan, trading horses and telling fortunes. Misha believes him. Misha also befriends a little girl, Janina Milgrom, after he encounters her while stealing a tomato from the Milgroms' backyard. He finds out that Janina and her family are Jewish. Misha starts stealing extra loaves of bread and leaving them for Janina's family. Following Uri's example, he also steals coal to help Doctor Korczak's orphans' home.

The following autumn, Warsaw's Jewish residents are forced into a crowded ghetto. Despite the fact that he's likely not ethnically Jewish, Misha goes along, alternately sleeping in the rubble with his fellow street orphans or in the Milgrom family's cramped apartment. After a few months, he discovers that he can squeeze through a tiny gap in the ghetto wall. He begins sneaking through the wall at night to steal food from restaurants and wealthy residences and smuggle it back for the Milgroms and Doctor Korczak's orphans. One night, the Nazis force everyone out of their buildings and make them stand at attention for hours in the snow, punishing anyone who stumbles. After Misha survives this ordeal alongside the Milgroms, Mr. Milgrom considers Misha to be part of the family despite Janina's Uncle Shepsel's disapproval. Misha stops calling himself Pilsudski and goes by Milgrom instead.

By the following summer, Janina has begun sneaking out of the ghetto at night to join Misha on his smuggling runs. Misha feels uncomfortable with Janina following him and knows he can't keep her safe, but she refuses to be deterred, even as the Jackboots begin threatening smugglers with punishment. Even after Misha tattles to Mr. Milgrom, who scolds Janina, she keeps sneaking out and stealing on her own. Eventually, Misha's orphan friend, Olek, is caught and hung for smuggling. Even though it's risky, the kids persist—they're too hungry to stop. One day, Janina finds a **milkweed** plant thriving in an alley. Its fluffy seeds delight her, making her think of **angels**. Meanwhile, on a smuggling run to the Nazi hotel, Misha runs into Uri, who hasn't been spending much time with the other orphans lately. Uri is working in the hotel, and he makes a confused Misha promise not to call him Uri and threatens to shoot him if he comes back.

That winter, Janina's mother, Mrs. Milgrom, dies of a long illness. Conditions in the ghetto are growing even worse. More and more orphans wander the streets, and seven new people crowd into the Milgroms' tiny space. Food becomes scarcer and scarcer. Mr. Milgrom invites Misha to celebrate Hanukkah with the family for the first time, saying that Jewish people must never forget how to be happy. Janina, however, is growing despondent. Misha cheers her up by searching the entire city for an egg just for her.

One day, Uri unexpectedly appears in the ghetto and warns Misha that trains are coming to deport the ghetto residents. He urges Misha to run and to never to board a train, no matter what. Misha warns his friends and family about the coming deportations. Sure enough, trains arrive and begin transporting people away from the ghetto, street by street, and some people are convinced that they'll be resettled in Jewish villages in the East. An old man, claiming to have escaped, appears in the ghetto and warns everyone that the "resettlement" rumor is a trick, that people are being killed and their remains burned in ovens. Most people mock him, but Mr. Milgrom quietly warns Misha to flee Warsaw with Janina. Misha realizes that Mr. Milgrom knew about the nighttime smuggling and didn't try to stop them, knowing that the children might be safer outside the ghetto than in.

One night, Misha and Janina struggle to reenter the ghetto after smuggling—the usual holes have been filled in. When they finally squeeze through an open gate by the train station, they discover that Mr. Milgrom is gone. Janina runs toward the trains that are about to depart, and Misha loses track of her in the crowd. He finally sees her in a soldier's arms, being tossed through the air into a boxcar. Misha thinks that, while airborne, she looks as graceful as a milkweed seed. The next thing Misha knows, he's being clubbed and kicked by a Nazi. The Nazi has a familiar voice and red hair—just before the Nazi shoots him, Misha recognizes the young man as Uri. When Misha eventually regains consciousness, he finds that his ear has been shot off. The trains are gone. Misha follows the tracks out of the ghetto, hoping to catch up with Janina.

Misha wanders down the tracks for a long time, hungry, in pain, and hallucinating. After some days, a Polish farmer finds him. Misha is forced to live in the farmer's barn and work for him; the farmer ties him to a post at night. Although the farmer's wife, Elzbieta, shows him kindness, Misha is enslaved there for three years. Finally, one night, the farmer's wife unties him, gives him a loaf of bread, and tells him to run.

By the time Misha escapes the farm, World War II is over, and thousands of displaced people are wandering along the train tracks. Misha gradually makes his way back to Warsaw and finds that the ghetto has been reduced to rubble. He finally begins to understand that Uri, though he'd been dishonest about his membership in the Nazi regime, was trying to spare him from death in a concentration camp. Misha learns how to

function in mainstream society, but he always drifts back to stealing. Eventually, he saves up enough money to move to the United States.

In America, Misha (renamed "Jack" at immigration) struggles to find stable employment, but he discovers that his real talent is telling stories of his life in the ghetto. He spends much of his time standing on street corners in Philadelphia, talking and talking about his past. Though most people dismiss him as crazy, some occasionally stop to listen. One day, a woman named Vivian listens and befriends him. They eventually get married, but because Misha is difficult to live with—he has nightmares, struggles with social norms, and sometimes commits petty theft—Vivian ends up leaving after a few months. Misha suspects that Vivian is pregnant. Misha goes back to talking on street corners until one day, decades later, a lady in her seventies kindly touches his mangled ear and tells him, "We hear you […] It's over."

One day, Misha is working at a grocery store, stocking shelves, when a young woman approaches him. The woman introduces herself as his daughter, Katherine. She has been searching for her father for years. She also introduces her daughter, four-year-old Wendy. Wendy has no middle name—Katherine has been waiting for Misha to give her one. Misha immediately chooses "Janina," and Katherine invites Misha to move in with her and Wendy. Misha spends his last years caring for Wendy Janina, who calls him "Poppynoodle." He plants a milkweed plant in the backyard to remind him of Janina, though Janina's story is the only one he's always kept to himself. Wendy's happy voice finally silences the voices of Jackboots in Misha's mind.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski – At the beginning of the story, Stopthief is a young orphan boy living on the streets of Warsaw, Poland, stealing food to survive. Stopthief is very small for his age (probably around eight, though he's uncertain of how old he is) and a fast runner. Stopthief meets fellow street orphan Uri when the two try to steal bread from the same rich lady. Uri quickly takes Stopthief under his care and becomes an older brother figure. He gives Stopthief the name "Misha Pilsudski" and invents a history for him—that he came from a large Roma family that traveled Europe in their wagon caravan. Uri also tries to instill a sense of self-preservation in Misha, with little success—Misha is naïve about the situation in Nazi-occupied Poland, and he even admires the "Jackboot" soldiers at first. (But after Misha sees Himmler in person, he decides that he no longer respects Nazi soldiers.) As the situation in Warsaw worsens, Misha starts stealing bread not only for himself, but for his new friend Janina Milgrom and for Doctor Korczak's orphans as well, showing his unselfish nature. After being forced into the ghetto, he discovers he can squeeze through a tiny gap in the ghetto wall and continues smuggling food from the main part of Warsaw for the Milgrom family and the orphans. Misha eventually becomes part of the Milgrom family, regarding Mr. Milgrom as his "Tata" and Janina as his little sister. After Misha is separated from the Milgroms and shot by Uri (who was secretly serving with the German Army all along), he wanders the Polish countryside. He hopes to follow the deportation trains and find Janina; eventually, a farmer takes him in. Misha is essentially enslaved on the farm for three years until the farmer's wife frees him. Misha eventually makes his way to the United States, where he's renamed Jack Milgrom. He drifts between menial jobs while coping with his painful wartime memories by telling story after story on street corners in the Philadelphia area. Decades after a brief, failed marriage to a woman named Vivian, Misha is reunited with his daughter, Katherine, who takes him into her home. Finally finding peace, he spends his last years taking care of his cherished granddaughter, Wendy Janina, who calls him "Poppynoodle."

Janina Milgrom – Janina is a young Jewish girl, seven years old at the beginning of the novel, whom Misha befriends when he wanders into her backyard and steals a tomato from her garden. She's Mr. and Mrs. Milgrom's daughter and Shepsel's niece. Janina has curly hair and huge brown eyes. Upon meeting Misha, she invites him to her birthday party. She and Misha reunite during the march to the ghetto, when Misha attaches himself to her family. Janina is spirited, willful, and very spoiled. She can even be quite bratty, screaming at her sick mother, throwing Misha's belongings over the ghetto wall, and trying to get him into trouble. Janina is also stubborn, determined, and brave. The summer after they move into the ghetto, Janina starts following Misha when he smuggles in the city at night and cannot be dissuaded from smuggling herself—no matter how much Misha tries to avoid her, and even after Mr. Milgrom forbids her. After her father tells her to stop sneaking out of the ghetto with Misha, she just sneaks out by herself. Despite her demanding nature, Janina is also capable of kindness, smuggling food for the little kids who share their cramped apartment. After Mrs. Milgrom's death, Janina becomes despondent, but she regains some of her old spark after Misha goes to great lengths to smuggle an egg for her. When Misha tries to get Janina to run away from the ghetto to avoid the deportations, she throws a fit and refuses to leave. Misha last sees her being grabbed by a Nazi soldier and thrown onto a boxcar. Many decades later, Misha gives his granddaughter, Wendy, the middle name Janina.

Uri – Uri is a red-headed street orphan in Warsaw who takes Stopthief under his wing. Uri's age is never given, but he seems to be a teenager. At the beginning of the story, he lives in the basement of an abandoned barbershop. He takes a liking to Stopthief, and they live together in the basement. Uri is also associated with a group of orphan boys who live in a stable. he

seems genuinely fond of Stopthief (whom he renames "Misha"), considering him a little brother like the biological brother he lost. However, in his urgency to protect Misha, Uri treats him roughly at times, smacking him for not listening and threatening him with violence for misbehavior. Around the time the street kids are forced into the ghetto, Uri starts to disappear for days on end. One night, while smuggling outside the ghetto walls, Misha finds Uri working in a fancy hotel. Uri threatens Misha, telling him never to come there again or to call him "Uri" in public. On the day of the deportations, Uri (who's wearing a Nazi uniform) shoots Misha in the ear. Misha eventually comes to understand that Uri was secretly serving with the German Army, but that he was trying to spare Misha from death in a concentration camp. Misha believes the real Uri was a good person at heart.

Mr. Tobiasz Milgrom – Mr. Milgrom is Janina's father and Mrs. Milgrom's husband; he's a pharmacist. Mr. Milgrom is a kind, gentle man who handles life in the Warsaw ghetto with quiet dignity. He is fond of Misha and welcomes him into the family after the Nazis inflict an all-night lineup on the community; he regards Misha like a son. During Hanukkah, Mr. Milgrom insists on celebrating, even without enough food or candles, because he believes it's important for Jewish people to maintain pride in their identity and to remember how to be happy. A protective father, Mr. Milgrom tries at first to stop Janina from smuggling, but when he learns about the coming deportations, he tries to get Misha and Janina to run away from the ghetto and never come back.

Mrs. Milgrom – Mrs. Milgrom is Janina's mother and Mr. Milgrom's husband. She is sickly and bitter about life in the ghetto. She also objects to Misha hanging around with Janina, and she never lets Misha call her "Mother," even after he's unofficially adopted into the household. Mrs. Milgrom dies of an unnamed illness one winter in the ghetto.

Uncle Shepsel – Uncle Shepsel is Janina's uncle who lives with her and her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Milgrom family. He is mostly concerned about his own wellbeing and resents Misha's presence in the household. Uncle Shepsel studies Lutheranism in the belief that if he's no longer a Jew, he will be allowed to leave the ghetto. However, he is deported to a camp along with Mr. Milgrom and Janina.

Doctor Korczak – Doctor Korczak (based on a real-life historical person) runs an orphans' home in Warsaw. He is a bald, bearded man with a kind heart and a ready laugh. Misha smuggles food for Doctor Korczak's orphans, and Doctor Korczak shows him fatherly kindness in turn. Even when the orphans are marched to the ghetto, Doctor Korczak leads them with cheerful songs.

Buffo – Buffo is an infamous Flop (a Jewish guard inside the ghetto) who hates children, especially Misha. He enjoys suffocating children by pushing their faces into his enormous stomach. He's also known for chewing mint leaves, the smell of which lingers on his victims. Misha and Janina can't resist baiting Buffo, calling him Fatman. After the war, Misha sees Buffo—now a shrunken shadow of his former self—wandering the streets of Warsaw.

Herr Himmler – Historically, Heinrich Himmler was the high-ranking Nazi who planned and implemented the Holocaust. In the story, Misha gets a glimpse of Himmler as he's being driven through the Warsaw ghetto. Misha is convinced that Himmler must wear the most impressive jackboots of all. However, in his eyes, Himmler looks like a scrawny chicken.

Vivian – Vivian is Misha's wife. She listens to Misha (then called Jack) talking on a street corner in Philadelphia and begins bringing him food and taking him on dates. Then she offers to marry him. However, the marriage only lasts for five months because Misha's traumatic memories of the war make him difficult to live with. When Vivian leaves Misha, she is pregnant with Katherine.

Wendy Janina – Wendy Janina is Katherine's daughter and Misha's granddaughter, a lively four-year-old. Katherine left Wendy's middle name blank until she found Misha, and she invites him to give Wendy a middle name. Misha immediately names her after Janina. Misha finds peace in helping take care of Wendy Janina and being her "Poppynoodle."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Kuba – Kuba is a boy from the gang of Warsaw street orphans. He likes to clown around.

Ferdi – Ferdi is a boy from the gang of Warsaw street orphans. He's an avid smoker and rather cynical.

Olek – Olek is a boy from the gang of Warsaw street orphans. He only has one arm, having lost the other when he got pushed in front of a train. The Nazis eventually hang Olek as a punishment for smuggling.

Enos – Enos is a boy from the gang of Warsaw street orphans. He always has a grim expression on his face and has a bitter sense of humor.

Big Henryk – Big Henryk is a boy from the gang of Warsaw street orphans. He's developmentally disabled. For most of the story, he wears coin bags from the bank instead of shoes. After Jon dies, Big Henryk starts wearing Jon's shoes.

Jon – Jon is a boy from the gang of Warsaw street orphans. He is thin and gray and never speaks; he dies during the first winter in the ghetto.

The farmer – After Misha escapes the ghetto, this farmer in the Polish countryside takes him in. But when Misha tries to leave, the farmer ties him to a post in the barn. Misha works on his farm for three years, until the farmer's wife frees him .

The farmer's wife / Elzbieta – Elzbieta is the wife of the Polish farmer who enslaves Misha on his farm. More compassionate

than her husband, she feeds Misha and tends his wounded ear. In the end, she finally resists her husband by setting Misha free and sending him off with a loaf of bread.

Katherine – Katherine is Misha's and Vivian's daughter. She spends years searching for Misha, reunited with him for the first time in a grocery store when she is in her twenties. She invites him to live with her and her daughter, Wendy.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

IDENTITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

In *Milkweed*, which takes place in the Warsaw, Poland ghetto in World War II, a young orphan boy knows no other name than "Stopthief," and he doesn't remember where he comes from. As the novel develops, Stopthief's identity develops as he meets and develops relationships with other characters—his friend Uri gives him the name Misha along with a fictional past, and he's later unofficially adopted into a Jewish family, the Milgroms. By showing how Misha increasingly flourishes through personal relationships, even when his identification isn't strictly accurate, Spinelli suggests that a sense of personal identity is vital to one's wellbeing because, regardless of its accuracy, such identity helps forge meaningful connections between people.

At first, Stopthief doesn't have a sense of personal identity beyond simplistic and imaginary characteristics that others use to define him. At the beginning of the novel, Stopthief meets his first real friend, Uri, while they're both stealing bread on the streets of Warsaw just before the German invasion. Puzzled by the younger boy's innocence of the world around him, Uri asks who he is. "I didn't understand the question. 'I'm Uri,' he said. 'What's your name?' I gave him my name. 'Stopthief.'" Stopthief has spent his life stealing food to survive. Because no one has known him for who he is, he's never been called anything besides "Thief"—a bare reflection of his actions that fails to capture a deeper sense of his identity. Eventually, Uri makes up a story so that his nameless young friend will have an identity and a history—even an imaginary one. "Uri said to me, 'Okay, this is who you are. Your name is Misha Pilsudski.' And he told me the rest...I, Misha Pilsudski, was born a Gypsy somewhere in the land of Russia. My family, including two great-grandfathers and a great-great-grandmother who was one hundred and nine years old, traveled from place to place in seven wagons pulled by fourteen horses." Later, Uri explains, the family's caravan was scattered by Nazi bombs, and Misha gradually found his way to the streets of Warsaw. With this story, Misha's whole identity is something invented and bestowed upon him by somebody else.

Even this invented identity gives Misha a basis for richer relationships with others. After Uri gives Misha his new name and imagined history, Misha feels like a new person—or perhaps like a real person for the first time. "And so, thanks to Uri [...] I was born, you might say [...] For days afterward, I did little else but stare into the barbershop mirror, fascinated by the face that stared back. [...] And then it was no longer enough [...] I needed to tell someone else." In other words, having an identity—even one that isn't literally accurate—makes Misha feel a real person, not just a reflection of what he's forced to do in his daily life (thieving and running). What's more, having that identity gives Misha the desire to connect with other people—something that has been a more incidental aspect of his identity in the past. Instead of coincidentally falling in with fellow thieves, he now desires connection that's based on sharing who he truly is.

Misha's sense of identity deepens as he suffers and celebrates with the Milgroms, a Jewish family he befriends in the Warsaw ghetto. Sometimes, Nazi soldiers force residents out of their homes and make them stand at attention all night, attacking and killing those who can't endure this punishment. The first time this happens, Mr. Milgrom slips Misha an extra armband (a marker of Jewishness) so that his lack of one doesn't raise any questions, and Misha survives the brutal night alongside the Milgroms and the rest of the ghetto community. "With my new armband, I thought: *I am a Jew now. A filthy son of Abraham. They're screaming at me. I am somebody*. I tried to listen well, to hear what they were screaming, but I could not understand much beyond 'dirty' and 'filthy' and 'Jew.'" It doesn't matter to Misha that he probably isn't ethnically Jewish, that he's not related to the Milgroms, or even that the Nazis are screaming abuse at him. For Misha, this is the first experience he's ever had of being included in a community and of belonging with anyone else, even to the point of sharing in the sufferings they endure. Even though the Milgrom family barely has any food to eat or candles to burn, Mr. Milgrom insists that the family observe Hanukkah. Mr. Milgrom explains the meaning behind the festival traditions: "[...] we remember to be happy and proud to be Jews and that we will always survive. This is our time. We celebrate ourselves. We must be happy now. We must never forget how to be happy." Essentially, Mr. Milgrom finds strength by remembering that past generations who were persecuted did not allow their oppressors to steal their identity. When Misha is invited into this community, even though he's a stranger to it, an entire people's collective identity—including their present and past sufferings and joys—become his as well.

The novel ends decades later, when Misha is an old man living with his daughter in the United States. As he holds his granddaughter, he reflects, "I think of all the voices that have

told me who I have been, the names I've had. […] Empty-handed victims once told me who I was. Then Uri told me. Then an armband. Then an immigration officer. And now this little girl in my lap, this little girl whose call silences the tramping Jackboots. Her voice will be the last. […] I am…Poppynoodle." In a sense, Misha never fully escapes being identified by others. Importantly, though, he's grown happier as his identity has been grounded less on others' ideas about his behavior, outward characteristics, or ethnicity (real or supposed) and more on his own relationships with those he loves.

WAR, DEHUMANIZATION, AND INNOCENCE

In *Milkweed*, Spinelli doesn't shrink from highlighting the Nazis' brutal anti-Semitism during the regime's occupation of Poland in World War II. There are numerous examples of characters being bullied, tortured, or killed just because they are Jewish. Misha Pilsudski is an outsider to the Jewish community, but even as a small boy, he witnesses brutality firsthand, shares in communal suffering, and shows a willingness to follow his friends even unto death. Through all this, he retains a spirit of innocence that contrasts with the Nazi regime's efforts to dehumanize people. Through this contrast, Spinelli argues that innocence, though it may not emerge from suffering unscathed, is an enduring sign of the power of human love—and it's ultimately stronger than the forces of dehumanization and oppression.

Dehumanization is the key to the Nazis' oppression of Warsaw's Jewish community. When Misha befriends a gang of other street orphans, they ask him if he's Jewish. Misha doesn't know what that means, so one of the boys informs him: "He pointed to himself. 'This is a Jew.' He pointed to the others. […] He pointed to the horse. 'That's a Jew.' He fell to his knees and scrabbled in the straw near the horse flop. He found something. He held it out to me. It was a small brown insect." The boy parrots the message his society has given him—that Jewish people aren't fully human and are worthless and dispensable. He's trying to convey to Misha, who's ignorant of all such prejudices, that Jewish people aren't welcome in the world they inhabit. After a horse is stolen from the city's carousel, the occupying Nazis grab a Jewish man (whom they view as "interchangeable" with all other Jews) to serve as a scapegoat. Misha watches as the Nazis torment the man by tying him up and spraying him with frigid water. From this episode, Misha learns how dehumanizing the Nazis' treatment of Jewish people really is. They're simply looking for an excuse to terrorize people by making an example out of one of their neighbors—sending the dehumanizing message that *any* of them can be tortured and killed, with no justification, at any time.

Misha's innocence contrasts starkly with this dehumanizing regime, both shielding him from it and also exemplifying how love can endure even in the face of hatred. When the Nazis march into Warsaw for the first time, Misha thinks it's an exciting parade and outruns everyone else to get the best view. "I looked at the faces of the crowd. No one was cheering, or even smiling. I was surprised. Weren't they thrilled by the spectacle before them?" In this instance, Misha's innocence about the Nazi regime (naïvely assuming that the Nazis are part of a parade) spares him the terror of what's unfolding before his eyes, giving him resilience. However, Spinelli's portrayal of Misha's innocence isn't completely naïve. When the entire community is forced to stand at attention in the cold all night, it's suggested that people like Misha can be manipulated because of their innocence: "It was easy to tell the people who had not fallen: they were the ones with the highest piles of snow on their shoulders and heads. I could now feel the faint weight of the snow on my head. I wondered how it looked. I took even more pains not to move. I didn't want my snow to fall off." On one hand, Misha is somewhat protected from the humiliation the Nazis intend to inflict, because he treats the experience as a kind of innocent game—holding still enough to accumulate snow. At the same time, his competitive mindset shows how ordeals like this one had another sinister layer—quietly turning those who can successfully comply against those who can't. In other words, innocence might be a survival strategy for Misha, but it also has its limitations, as he can be manipulated and subtly dehumanized as a result.

However, life under Nazi rule never steals Misha's innocence entirely. After he misses the train for the camps, he wanders into the Polish countryside and is eventually taken in by a farmer. When the farmer asks if Misha is Jewish, he says yes—that he's following the train in hopes of finding "the ovens." The irony is that Misha *isn't* Jewish, but he identifies so strongly with his adoptive Jewish family and the community he's lived with that reuniting with them is all he cares about. Part of this is Misha's childish innocence—he doesn't know what the rumored "ovens" really are, and he doesn't know the terrible fate of those sent to the camps—but given that Misha has faithfully risked his life for years to smuggle food to the Milgroms and his other friends, it's believable that he really *would* follow them to imprisonment and death. His innocence, then, is really a sign of his undaunted love.

When Misha immigrates to the United States after the war, he struggles with difficult memories and adapting to social norms. He copes with these things by compulsively telling his stories to whomever will listen—and even to those who won't: "The important thing was not that you listened, but that I talked. […] I was born into craziness. When the whole world turned crazy, I was ready for it. That's how I survived. And when the craziness was over, where did that leave me? On the street corner, that's where, running my mouth, spilling myself. And I needed you there." In a way, it seems like Misha's innocence is lost as a result of what he lost during the war (like the Milgroms). But he

refuses to let go of his humanity, even if it means telling his story in ways that seem "crazy" to onlookers and that make others uncomfortable. By passing along his stories of childhood innocence, Misha continues resisting the dehumanizing forces of war for as long as he can.

INGENUITY, RESILIENCE, AND SURVIVAL

Misha Pilsudski, an orphan in the Warsaw ghetto during World War II, is not treated as particularly clever. Other street kids mock him for being a runt and for being clueless about the wider world. Yet Misha, who's never known anything but life on the streets, knows how to be quick, adaptable, and observant in order to survive. As the story goes on, he learns to further develop his supposed weaknesses—especially his small size—in order to adapt to higher-stakes circumstances, helping others who cannot help themselves in the ghetto. His whole life is a story of using limited resources to bounce back and keep going. By portraying the unlikely Misha as ingenious and resilient, Spinelli argues that a person's weakest traits—even those that others mock—might turn out to be the very ones that position them to rise to the occasion in difficult circumstances, and even to help others.

Even as a young boy, Misha has lifelong experience in creatively adapting to circumstances in order to survive. Misha and fellow street orphan Uri adapt to the circumstances around them in war-torn Warsaw. After routine bombing raids begin, "On some nights we were a city of two. We did not have to snatch. We simply walked into the empty shops of bakers and butchers and grocers and took whatever we pleased and walked out and walked home. We did not run. The streetlights were out." The city's catastrophe simply becomes a new mode of survival for the two boys, already used to fending for themselves. As the war makes food scarcer in Warsaw, Misha isn't deterred, but seeks out new possibilities for stealing food. He remembers, "I had to be patient. […] I learned to look for little children playing outside a large, fine house. When they went back inside, they often forgot to lock the door. In I walked, sometimes right behind the child. […] Some children said nothing. They seemed to think that if I strolled in the door with them, I must belong. I walked straight to the dining room or the kitchen. […] If there was no one or a very young child, I would take my time shopping in the kitchen." Misha might be teased by other kids for being "stupid" and naïve, but he is observant of the world around him and clever about making the best of his circumstances. When snatching food off the streets no longer works, his awareness of people's behavior helps him adapt and survive.

In the ghetto, Misha's supposed weaknesses end up becoming his strengths, enabling him to help others as well as himself. After Misha follows his Jewish friends into the ghetto, he quickly discovers that he can slip in and out of a narrow section of the ghetto's wall whenever he wants. He starts sneaking out nightly to steal food from the outside world and bring it to his friends inside. He tells the surprised Milgrom family, "'I can go anywhere.' I was not boasting, I was simply stating a fact. I had come to love my small size, my speed, my slipperiness. Sometimes I thought of myself as a bug or a tiny rodent, slipping into places that the eye could not even see." Misha has often been mocked for his small size, but from his experiences as a thief, he's come to see his size as an asset and even to take pride in it. It allows him to fit into spaces in the world where others literally cannot—and this allows him to dodge authorities, fend for himself, and help those he loves. Through his experiences in the ghetto, Misha realizes a sense of purpose: "Some people died from sickness, some from hunger. There wasn't much I could do about the sickness, but hunger, that was where I came in. Feeding my family—and as much as possible Doctor Korczak's orphans—was what the world had made me for. All the parts—the stealing, the speed, the size, the rash stupidity—came together to make me the perfect smuggler." Misha discovers that his experiences in life so far, even his weaknesses and struggles, have prepared him to help those who are even more helpless than himself.

After the war, Misha's need for ingenuity and resilience persists, and he rises to the challenge. Displaced and homeless, he adapts by selling stolen items. Now, though, he discovers that his voice is his greatest asset, not his speed or sneakiness: "For me, it was more about talking than about selling […] up until the end of the war, I had probably not spoken two thousand words in my life. Now you could not shut me up. […] [Words] were free for the taking. No one ever chased me down a road yelling, 'Stop! Thief! He stole my word!'" Misha finds that the unique experiences and stories he collected during the war are richer fodder than smuggled goods. Perhaps this is because, while Misha's childhood sneakiness and resourcefulness helped him survive in the short term, helping others and connecting with them through storytelling are sources of resilience that endure for the long term.

FAMILY

An orphan wandering the streets of Warsaw, Misha has no memory of his family of origin. The first semblance of family that Misha knows is Uri, a teenager and fellow orphan who takes a liking to him, watches over him, and gives him a name. Misha contents himself with the made-up family history that Uri gives him, even though he knows deep down that his huge caravan of Russian "Gypsy" relatives doesn't exist, because even a fictional sense of belonging is more than he's ever known in real life. (During World War II, when the book is set, "Gypsy" was a descriptor of Roma ethnicity, but it's now considered an ethnic slur.) Later, Misha befriends the Milgroms, a Jewish family living in the ghetto, and he bonds even more strongly with them due to his

willingness to suffer alongside them—even though Misha is not related to them, nor is he likely even Jewish. It's not until the very end of the book that Misha reunites with blood relatives, and even then, the nontraditional family identity he's pieced together throughout his life remains an important part of him. Through Misha's lifelong search for family, Spinelli suggests that genuine family bonds are forged in various ways, and that although biological family is important, it isn't the exclusive or necessarily the most powerful kind.

Misha's familial bond with Uri—an older boy who takes a gruff, big-brotherly attitude towards him—is mostly based on the protection Uri offers. Though Uri proves himself genuinely loyal in the end, Misha's relationship with him has a dysfunctional aspect. Uri feels a fierce protectiveness toward Misha for reasons that are never fully explained (beyond a hint that his real younger brother died a long time ago). He's even violent toward Misha when he defies Uri's efforts to keep him safe. When Misha makes a spectacle of himself in public even though Uri has warned him never to call attention to himself, Uri is furious: "I had never seen him so mad," Misha thinks. "He punched me in the forehead. The back of my head banged against the wall. 'Someday I'm going to have to kill you to keep you alive. […] He stomped off. By the time he reached the street, I was at his side." Uri's protectiveness takes a disturbingly violent turn sometimes, but Misha hasn't known family love of any kind before, so he doesn't question Uri's treatment of him—it doesn't dissuade Misha from faithfully following the only guardian he has. Uri's tough love sets up the story's climax: when Misha tries to follow his adoptive sister, Janina Milgrom, who's just been thrown onto a train headed for a concentration camp, he's struck down by a Nazi. "When I landed, a club pounded my shoulders and I was kicked again […] 'Die, piglet!' *The voice*. I looked up. The red hair. The face. 'Uri!' I cried, and the gun went off." Though Uri has been absent from the ghetto for some time, Misha hasn't known until this moment that Uri has actually been serving with the German soldiers. Now, his harsh efforts to instill a sense of self-preservation in Misha make sense—he knew exactly what Misha would be up against and wanted to give him a fighting chance to survive. And when he shoots Misha, he clips Misha's ear, only injuring him badly enough to make him miss the train—thereby sparing his life. Uri did care about Misha all along, even though his harshness (as well as his dishonesty about his identity) make him a less-than-ideal brother figure.

In the Milgrom family (whom Misha met when he befriended Janina and began leaving scraps of food outside their home), Misha forms a healthier familial bond through shared suffering—and he also feels fully accepted for the first time. After Misha endures an all-night roundup in the ghetto alongside the Milgrom family—standing at attention for hours in the snow—he finds he's bonded with the family in a new way. "When I awoke, […] Uncle Shepsel, propped on his elbow, was pointing at me and saying, 'Why is he sleeping here? […] He's not family.' Mr. Milgrom looked straight at him. 'He is now.'" Misha isn't related to the Milgroms, but shared suffering—helping one another endure pain and humiliation in order to survive—knits people together on a deeper level than blood alone can. From now on, Misha doesn't just visit the Milgroms every once in a while, but often spends the night with them. "From the moment Mr. Milgrom said, 'He is now,' my identity as a Gypsy vanished. […] Deep down I guess I had always known my […] history was merely Uri's story, not reality." For Misha, his identity is a reflection of his relationships with those around him. Now that he's accepted into a real family, he no longer needs the fictional identity Uri had bestowed on him. Though this one, too, is based on a fiction (he's not really Janina's brother), it's more genuine than Uri's made-up story because it's grounded on mutual loyalty and affection.

At the end of the novel, Misha finally reunites with his biological family: his long-lost daughter and granddaughter (the offspring of a brief, failed marriage after he moved to the United States). When he has the chance to give his granddaughter a middle name, he immediately chooses Janina, the name of his adoptive sister in the ghetto. This suggests that the various forms of family can be equally real in their different ways. Though his reunion with biological family provides a resolution for his life as an orphan and wanderer, it doesn't supplant the genuine bonds forged with his adoptive family decades earlier, which remain vibrant in Misha's mind long after the Milgroms' deaths. This reinforces Spinelli's point that although biological family is very important to a person's sense of identity, blood isn't the only thing that forms a family—love and loyalty (especially forged through painful experiences) do, too.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MILKWEED

The milkweed of the novel's title symbolizes the resilience of the human soul in the barren environment of the ghetto and the survival of the soul beyond it. One day, Misha and Janina find a milkweed plant growing in an alley, "a spot of green in the ghetto desert." The plant's pods crack open, sending white puffs of seed flying out of the rubble and into the sky. Janina loves the puffy seeds and calls one her **angel**. Much like Misha and his adopted family (Janina and the rest of the Milgroms) keep pressing on in spite of the plight they experience at the hands of the Nazi regime, the milkweed persists in sprouting even amid the barren conditions of the Warsaw ghetto. Spinelli thus uses the image of ethereal, floating milkweed to suggest that the human spirit finds a way

to survive and to dream of life beyond—even in a place like the ghetto that's designed to crush such hopes.

ANGELS

Angels symbolize belief in the goodness and persistence of the human spirit, despite evidence of cruelty and suffering. At first, angels are an ambivalent image: when the street orphan gang sees an angel statue in a cemetery, Olek explains to Misha that angels are invisible beings that help people in trouble, but Enos mocks this idea. He spits on the statue, asking why the angels didn't stop Olek from losing his arm in an accident, or why they don't spare Jon from dying. Misha wonders about the nature and existence of angels throughout the story. He decides he believes in them, eventually associating them with delicate puffs of **milkweed** that sail on the breeze, and implicitly with his beloved sister Janina (after she is taken from the ghetto on a deportation train). The problem of cruelty is never resolved, but the persistence of angel imagery suggests that even the Nazis' worst cruelty can't stamp out hope.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Milkweed* published in 2010.

Chapter 2 Quotes

More thumping sounds in the distance. "What is that?" I asked him.

"Jackboot artillery," he said.

"What's artillery?"

"Big guns. Boom boom. They're shelling the city." He stared at me. "Who are you?"

I didn't understand the question.

"I'm Uri," he said. "What's your name?"

I gave him my name. "Stopthief."

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski, Uri (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the story, the protagonist, a street orphan named "Stopthief," runs into an older boy, Uri, while they're both trying to steal bread from the same lady on the streets of Warsaw, Poland. Stopthief doesn't seem to know much of anything—he's seemingly oblivious to the fact that the Germans are invading Warsaw, for example. He's further baffled when Uri asks him who he is, as the very concept of personal identity seems strange to him. Stopthief doesn't remember where he comes from, and his only name is what's yelled at him as he steals from people in order to survive: "Stop! Thief!" He has no a sense of personal identity beyond that daily struggle for survival. Stopthief's introduction to Uri shows how disconnected he is from human relationships, something that his friendship with Uri will change for the first time. It also hints at Stopthief's innocence of World War II raging around him—an innocence that will be both an asset and a weakness as the story unfolds.

Chapter 3 Quotes

[One boy] kicked ground straw at a boy who hadn't spoken. […] "That's a Jew." He pointed to himself. "This is a Jew." He pointed to the others. "That's a Jew. That's a Jew. That's a Jew." He pointed to the horse. "That's a Jew." He fell to his knees and scrabbled in the straw near the horse flop. He found something. He held it out to me. It was a small brown insect. "This is a Jew. Look. Look!" He startled me.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Uri

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Upon meeting Uri, Stopthief gets introduced to a gang of orphan boys like himself. The other kids puzzle over Stopthief's apparent lack of a past and his ignorance of the world—Stopthief doesn't know if he's Jewish or not, or even what a "Jew" is. This prompts one of the orphan boys to give Stopthief a lesson. It turns out that most of the orphans are Jewish, suggesting that they may be orphaned because of Jewish people's vulnerable status in Poland at the time. In any case, the kids have no doubt about their position in the eyes of society, as the boy proves when he insistently holds the insect in Stopthief's face and declares that Jews are the same as bugs. He's trying to convey to Stopthief how worthless Jewish people are according to Nazi ideology—not that he believes this ideology himself, but that he wants the clueless Stopthief to understand what he's up against in this oppressive world. The boys have internalized the dehumanizing message being spread through their

society, but Stopthief has remained innocently untouched by it—a mindset he'll fight to maintain as the story goes on.

Chapter 7 Quotes

I, Misha Pilsudski, was born a Gypsy somewhere in the land of Russia. My family, including two great-grandfathers and a great-great-grandmother who was one hundred and nine years old, traveled from place to place in seven wagons pulled by fourteen horses. There were nineteen more horses trailing the wagons, as my father was a horse trader. My mother told fortunes with cards.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Uri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the new identity Uri gives Stopthief one day, naming him Misha Pilsudski and inventing his background from scratch. Having no memory of his origins, Misha embraces the story, thinking of it as real. Uri calls Misha a "Gypsy," which at the time was a descriptor for the Roma people, but which is considered a slur today. The Roma people are believed to have originated in northern India in the first millennium C.E. and then spent centuries traveling throughout Europe, often following trades like horse dealing. Like Jewish people, the Roma people were targeted for extermination by the Nazi regime. The only piece of Uri's story that seems to be true is the possibility that Misha comes from a Roma background—the word "Gypsy" sounds vaguely familiar to him, and he has indistinct memories of living among wagons and horses. Regardless of its inaccuracy, the new identity is a kind gesture on Uri's part—he understands that a person needs a sense of identity in order to feel properly oriented in the world. This proves true in Misha's case—before, he was known by what he did to survive ("Stop! Thief!"), but now, he can at least pretend that he's part of a family and a history.

I loved my story. No sooner did I hear the words than I became my story. I loved myself. For days afterward, I did little else but stare into the barbershop mirror, fascinated by the face that stared back.

"Misha Pilsudski…," I kept saying. "Misha Pilsudski… Misha Pilsudski…" And then it was no longer enough to stare at myself and repeat my name to myself. I needed to tell someone else.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Janina Milgrom, Uri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

After Uri makes up the story of Misha's name and Roma identity, Misha grows obsessed with it. Orphaned and focused on bare survival, he's never had a highly developed sense of personal identity before. The concept of having his own story—albeit a fictional one—is new to him, and he finds that it changes the way he relates to himself. He studies himself in the mirror and repeats his name, as if trying to internalize this new self: someone who's more than an orphan and a thief. But soon, he finds that it's not enough to savor his own story—he wants to share it with others. This suggests that a stable sense of personal identity provides a basis for relating to others. This, too, is something that Misha has had little chance to experience. Even his relationship with Uri has been mostly dependent, relying on the older boy for shelter and protection. Now that Misha has a story, he wants to tell it—in other words, he feels a growing desire to find common ground and make friends with others, setting him up to befriend Janina and the Milgrom family later in the story.

Chapter 9 Quotes

I had an idea. The next day I snatched two loaves of bread. One I gave to Uri, the other I took to the house of Janina the girl. It had snowed overnight. Brown stubble poked through the white blanket covering the garden. I pushed the snow from the top step. I set the loaf down, knocked on the door, and ran.

The next day I came back to look. The bread was gone.

That was how it started.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Janina Milgrom, Uri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

His whole life, Misha has been focused on snatching food in order to survive—but this changes one day when he goes on a thieving spree and brings home five loaves of bread. Uri scolds him for stealing more than he needs and delivers the extra loaves to an orphans' home. Misha has never thought

about stealing for other people's benefit before. This is a next step in his growing identity—first he gains a name, then he befriends a young girl named Janina, and then, prompted by the thought of others' hunger, he begins to think about Janina's needs beyond his own. Misha starts leaving bread for Janina and her family whenever he can, a personal connection that shapes Misha's future by forging a friendship that will become a family bond in the years to come. But it also sets a new course for Misha's stealing, as he begins using his ingenuity to smuggle food for people who don't share his talents for sneaking. When Warsaw's Jewish community is forced into the ghetto, Misha's smuggling will make him an asset to many of the community's neediest residents.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ One time I entered a house through an unlocked back door. […] I moved through the kitchen and suddenly found myself standing in a doorway, staring at a family of people having dinner around a long table. Food and silver and glass sparkled everywhere. In the middle was a great, golden roasted bird, perhaps a goose or turkey. I must have surprised them, for all movement stopped as they stared at me while I stared at the table—but not for long. As always, I was the first to move. I believe this was the first rule of life that I learned, though it was a twitch in my muscles rather than a thought in my head: *Always be the first to move.* As long as that happened, they would have to catch up, and I could not be caught.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

As the German occupation of Warsaw grows more oppressive, food becomes scarcer. This means that Misha must become more creative in order to survive. As it becomes harder to snatch food off of shoppers in the streets or shelves in stores, he begins entering people's homes. This episode of snatching a roasted bird off a family's dinner table is the most brazen example: in a display of quick thinking, Misha uses the family's surprise to his advantage by grabbing the food and running. His "always be the first to move" motto is a result of the ingenuity he's developed as a street orphan. When he stumbles into situations where he clearly doesn't belong, like a fancy dinner, he uses people's shock at his sudden appearance to buy time. The passage is also an example of something Misha doesn't have—not just food, but a family. Thus the quote hints at an even deeper unmet need in Misha's life—one that will ultimately be met in the unlikely environment of the Warsaw ghetto.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ I had never seen him so mad. His hair looked redder than ever, only this time it was not because he was laughing. He punched me in the forehead. The back of my head banged against the wall. "Someday I'm going to have to kill you to keep you alive." He flapped his arm. "You want to do it your way? You want to go off by yourself? Not listen to me? Go ahead!" He kicked me. "Go ahead!" He stomped off. By the time he reached the street, I was at his side.

Related Characters: Uri, Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Uri's reaction after Misha gets hit by a car, though he doesn't get injured. Uri had just been teaching Misha that the key to survival on the streets is not to draw attention to oneself. Misha, concentrating hard, immediately stumbles into traffic, canceling out his efforts to look inconspicuous. Uri's disproportionate anger is a dysfunctional display of his affection for Misha. He worries about the younger boy and feels responsible to protect him, while knowing he's ultimately powerless to ensure his safety, so he takes out his frustration violently. His anger also suggests that Uri knows what Misha doesn't—that the war is going to test Misha's naïve innocence in a terrible way. His words, "Someday I'm going to have to kill you to keep you alive," chillingly foreshadow the final encounter between the two boys later in the book, and they show that in Uri's mind, a fate worse than death could befall Misha if he isn't careful. Finally, Misha's willingness to continue following Uri, even after being treated so harshly, show that he is determined to stick with whatever family he has—he has no memory of being treated more lovingly and therefore doesn't see Uri as abusive.

Chapter 14 Quotes

I couldn't believe my eyes: one of the horses was gone!

Only three hooves remained. [...] A scrap of surviving color told me the horse had been black. It was mine. My beautiful black-and-golden horse.

"Find the Jew!" people were calling. As I stared at the three horseless hooves, I felt my own anger rising. "Find the dirty Jew!" the voices called over and over, and I think one of the voices I heard was mine.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Misha becomes obsessed with the beautiful merry-go-round in Warsaw, even though he can't afford a ticket and gets kicked off when he tries to sneak on. He particularly loves a certain black horse with golden hooves and tassels—but one day, that horse gets stolen off the merry-go-round. The crowd's reaction to the theft is a chilling example of the anti-Semitism that was rampant in the city at the time. There's zero evidence that a Jewish person is responsible for stealing the horse, but people seize upon that idea, allowing a member of an already hated minority group to be a scapegoat and take the blame. (Indeed, some of the Nazi soldiers who are watching use this angry upswell to justify seizing and tormenting a Jewish resident a short time later.) Just as striking is the way Misha gets swept up in the anger. Misha is portrayed as a naïve and innocent character—until recently, he didn't even know what the word "Jewish" meant, and he seems oblivious to the Nazis' hostility toward people, including himself. But when Misha joins in the angry chant, it's an example of how even "innocent" people can get caught up in a deadly crowd mentality when something they love is threatened—becoming dehumanized themselves, even as they're complicit in dehumanizing others.

Chapter 16 Quotes

I told her how I found a low place in the wall and simply stepped over. I added: "I can go anywhere." I was not boasting, I was simply stating a fact. I had come to love my small size, my speed, my slipperiness. Sometimes I thought of myself as a bug or a tiny rodent, slipping into places that the eye could not even see.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Janina Milgrom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

After Warsaw's Jewish community is forcibly moved into a ghetto, Misha goes along, staying with his new friends, the Milgrom family. But whereas most people experience the ghetto as a form of imprisonment, it never occurs to Misha to feel that he's stuck there. He quickly discovers ways to get in and out, whether it's stepping over an unfinished portion of the wall or, later, squeezing through a gap that was thought to be too small for any person. Misha's mindset is clear as he explains his actions to his friend Janina: Misha has always been tiny, fast, and sneaky, and this combination of traits allows him to fit into spaces that the rest of the world simply overlooks. Because of this ability, Misha doesn't think of himself as trapped inside the ghetto—or anywhere else, for that matter. This sense of freedom, coupled with his ingenuity, will allow Misha to help ghetto residents like the Milgrom family by sneaking in and out to provide much-needed food. In another way, Misha's sense that "I can go anywhere" points to his ability to make space for himself in a world that looks down on him as an unwanted Roma orphan. With his innocence and resilience, he cheerfully finds space for himself in places—like the Milgrom family—where he doesn't naturally seem to belong.

Chapter 17 Quotes

Janina looked at me. "What happened?"

"Unlucky orphans," I said. I told her that was what Enos called them—orphans who did not live in Doctor Korczak's home, or any other, and who roamed the streets hungry and begging and sick.

"Be glad we're not unlucky orphans," I told her.

"Is gray Jon an unlucky orphan?" she said.

"Oh no," I said. "He's a lucky one. He's with us."

Related Characters: Janina Milgrom, Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Jon, Doctor Korczak, Enos

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Misha's sense of what constitutes "lucky" or "unlucky" in the world of the Warsaw ghetto. He's just been introducing his friend Janina to some of the street orphans he's gotten to know, like "gray Jon," who suffers from an unknown disease and gradually wastes away and dies after being relocated to the ghetto. They also witness a group of orphans fighting over a single potato, with one child running off victorious and the rest left hungry. Misha describes those kids as "unlucky" because they all must fend for themselves. By contrast, even a child whom most would see as terribly underprivileged, like the sickly Jon, is "lucky" in Misha's eyes, because he has a group of fellow orphans sharing food with him and watching his back. This quote underlines Misha's growing sense of family as a group of people who support one another through shared suffering. It also highlights the tragic social hierarchy of the ghetto: orphans who are placed in a home like Doctor Korczak's, or who manage to cobble together a sense of family like Misha and his friends do, might succeed in getting by. Implicitly, then, the "unlucky orphans" are those without a support network, who are fully exposed to the sufferings of the ghetto and thus more likely to succumb to them.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ The soldiers screamed. With my new armband, I thought: *I am Jew now. A filthy son of Abraham. They're screaming at me. I am somebody.* I tried to listen well, to hear what they were screaming, but I could not understand much beyond "dirty" and "filthy" and "Jew."

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Mr. Tobiasz Milgrom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes a pivotal event in Misha's life in the Warsaw ghetto. Periodically, Nazi soldiers force residents out of their homes and make them spend entire nights standing at attention, often punishing those who cannot endure it. There's no point to these lineups—it's just a way to terrorize people and make them feel powerless. The first time it happens to Misha, his new father figure, Mr. Milgrom, gives him an armband (signifying Jewishness) so that Misha will blend in with everyone else and not call attention to himself. For Misha, though, the armband is more than that: it makes him feel a part of a bigger group, a larger identity, for the first time in his life. In fact, the Nazis' abusive screaming has the same effect on him. The irony is that the Nazis' dehumanizing words are meant to make people like Misha feel worthless. Instead, they make Misha feel like "somebody." Being called "dirty" and "filthy" is terrible, yet because of Misha's eagerness to identify with the people around him, he is able to remain resilient despite such treatment.

❝ The screaming never stopped. By now people were falling all over the courtyard, falling and staggering to their feet and falling again. It was easy to tell the people who had not fallen: they were the ones with the highest piles of snow on their shoulders and heads. I could now feel the faint weight of the snow on my head. I wondered how it looked. I took even more pains not to move. I didn't want my snow to fall off.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

This quite illustrates the subtly dehumanizing effects of life under the Nazi regime. During the lineup in the ghetto courtyard, many people succumb to sheer exhaustion and fear under the torrent of abuse. Those who don't succumb are easily identified because of the snow that accumulates on their heads as they stand motionless. Misha is one of the latter group, and he soon begins to take pride in this fact. This suggests that there are two levels to the strategy behind the lineups: on a surface level, the object is to terrorize people through the Nazis' unpredictable demands and punishment of the weak. But on a subtler level, the object is to turn victims against one another by setting the stronger (those with greater endurance) against the weaker (those who stumble). Even Misha, who views the lineup as a kind of innocent game and is thereby able to endure it, is susceptible to this—he even wishes that the soldiers would acknowledge his impressive pile of snow. The passage thus exemplifies the multiple ways that life in the ghetto could erode people's humanity, particularly people who are innocent and naïve like Misha.

When I awoke, I thought I was back in the courtyard under the blinding lights, but it was only the sun in the window. And Uncle Shepsel, propped on his elbow, was pointing at me and saying, "Why is he sleeping here? He smells."

"I regret to inform you," said Mr. Milgrom, "that you are not a rose garden yourself these days."

Uncle Shepsel pounded the floor. "He's not family."

Mr. Milgrom looked straight at him. "He is now."

Related Characters: Mr. Tobiasz Milgrom , Uncle Shepsel, Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Up to this point, Misha hangs around with the Milgrom family because he happened to befriend Janina when he stole from her family's garden. The lineup in the ghetto is a turning point, however: after Misha endures the night standing alongside the Milgroms, listening to the Nazis' abuse, Mr. Milgrom accepts him as part of the family despite Janina's Uncle Shepsel's reservations. Misha did not have to share in the Milgroms' suffering in this way, as he's capable of getting in and out of the ghetto at will—he could have chosen to spend the night hidden in the rubble with his orphan friends. Instead, he willingly shared the Milgroms' terrifying ordeal, even happily wearing an armband despite not being Jewish. Mr. Milgrom's welcome of Misha suggests that there is more to family than biological connection—it has just as much to do with the struggles families survive together. This theme is prominent throughout the story—Misha forges family bonds with fellow orphans and eventually with his own relatives, but perhaps the most influential bonds are those he forges with the Milgroms by joining their fight for survival.

Chapter 22 Quotes

From the moment Mr. Milgrom said, "He is now," my identity as a Gypsy vanished. Gone were the seven wagons, seven brothers, five sisters, Greta the speckled mare. Deep down I guess I had always known my Gypsy history was merely Uri's story, not reality. I didn't miss it. When you own nothing, it's easy to let things go. I supposed my last name was Milgrom now, so Pilsudski went too. I kept Misha. I liked it.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Uri, Mr. Tobiasz Milgrom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

After Mr. Milgrom accepts Misha as an adoptive member of the family, Misha's attitude toward his own identity changes. Before this, Misha loved the made-up identity given to him by Uri: a huge family and beloved horse that traveled Europe together in a wagon caravan. It didn't matter to him that the identity had no factual basis, since it still provided a way for Misha to understand himself and relate to others. But now, being welcomed and loved by Mr. Milgrom on the basis of their shared experiences, Misha learns that an identity based on real relationships is better than a fictional one. That being the case, he no longer feels the need to cling to Uri's story. This shift in Misha's identity also signals a change in his family identity. Before, Uri was the closest thing Misha had to a family member, and his approval of Misha was always fragile, based on Misha's good behavior. Now, for the first time, Misha experiences fatherly, unconditional love from Mr. Milgrom.

Chapter 28 Quotes

Some people died from sickness, some from hunger. There wasn't much I could do about the sickness, but hunger, that was where I came in. Feeding my family—and as much as possible Doctor Korczak's orphans—was what the world had made me for. All the parts—the stealing, the speed, the size, the rash stupidity—came together to make me the perfect smuggler.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Doctor Korczak

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Life in the Warsaw ghetto, cut off from the main part of the city, is filled with suffering. Packed into cramped conditions, thousands of people die from disease, and as the seasons wear on, there is less and less food available. These difficult conditions prompt Misha to rise to the occasion, however. Having spent most of his life fending for himself as an orphan on the streets, he now uses his quickness, inconspicuous size, and thieving skill to help others by sneaking out of the ghetto at night and stealing food from the more prosperous parts of town. Misha sees this as a natural progression from stealing food on the streets when

he was younger; that life simply trained him for the bigger responsibilities to come—"what the world had made [him] for." This is a good example of Misha's ingenuity and resilience: not only does he figure out how to put his skills to use in a changing environment, but he's able to look on his past experiences as part of a broader story that's bigger than himself. He also recognizes that he cannot help everyone he wants to help, but that he's situated among specific people—the Milgroms and Doctor Korczak's orphans—whom he *can* help, and he focuses his skills on providing for them as best he can.

Chapter 30 Quotes

❝ She stood on tiptoes and held it as high as she could and let it go. It sailed toward the sky.

"*That's* my angel," she said.

Then they were all around us, milkweed puffs, flying. I picked one from her hair. I pointed. "Look." A milkweed plant was growing by a heap of rubble.

It was thrilling just to see a plant, a spot of green in the ghetto desert. The bird-shaped pods had burst and the puffs were spilling out, flying off. I cracked a pod from the stem and blew into the silk-lined hollow, sending the remaining puffs sailing, a snowy shower rising, vanishing into the clouds.

Related Characters: Janina Milgrom, Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

One day, Misha and Janina are napping in an alley when they notice puffs from a milkweed plant sailing through the air. Milkweed becomes an important symbol in Misha's life from now on: on one level, it represents the resilience of life in the midst of the kids' deprived existence in the ghetto. Just as the hardy milkweed manages to thrive and even give off seeds in an otherwise barren environment, so have Misha and Janina managed to survive and cling to hope in a world where they aren't seen as valuable. Janina also associates milkweed seeds with angels—which she believes to be the part of a person that survives death. After the ghetto, when Misha survives and Janina presumably goes on to die in a concentration camp, Misha always associates milkweed with his memories of Janina. To him, Janina's irrepressible spirit can't be snuffed out by the horrors of the war, and a piece of her, like a puff of milkweed, always flies free and innocent.

Chapter 32 Quotes

❝ Uncle Shepsel opened his eyes and smiled down at me. I had seen the same smile in the room lately, as he read the book that had changed him from a Jew to a Lutheran. […] Suddenly his expression changed. He seemed confused. He looked hard into my face and did not seem to know me. "You go. Every night you go," he said. "Why do you come back?" I did not have an answer. Maybe he found it in my face, for after a while he turned and walked off.

Related Characters: Uncle Shepsel, Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Janina Milgrom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

Shepsel, Janina's uncle who lives with the Milgroms in the ghetto, always stays rather aloof from the rest of the family. At the same time, Shepsel is happy to eat the food Misha provides through smuggling while rejecting Misha's presence in the Milgrom household, arguing that he isn't family. Later, Shepsel studies a book about Lutheranism, claiming that if he changes his religious affiliation, the Nazis will let him leave the ghetto. Because of his self-centeredness and lack of loyalty to the family to begin with, it's never clear whether Shepsel's alleged conversion to Christianity is sincere, or if it's primarily a way of distancing himself from the others and looking out for his own survival. The latter explanation is strongly implied. Either way, it allows Spinelli to contrast Shepsel with Misha: unlike Shepsel, Misha isn't ethnically Jewish or even related to the Milgroms, yet he chooses to identify himself with them and share in the suffering and dangers they face. This is an example of how chosen relationships can be even stronger than blood relationships in certain cases. It's a kind of "family" than Shepsel cannot understand.

Chapter 34 Quotes

Now it was Hanukkah time again [...] On the first day Mr. Milgrom told me the story of Hanukkah. How long ago the Greeks tried to destroy everything Jewish. ("See, this is not the first time.") How the Jews were outnumbered and had no chance against the Greeks but beat them anyway. How the Jews celebrated by lighting an oil lamp. But the celebration would have to be short because there was only enough oil to last for one day. And then a miracle happened. The oil lasted for eight days.

Related Characters: Mr. Tobiasz Milgrom , Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

Misha has been living with the Milgrom family for over a year at this point. Last year, Mrs. Milgrom didn't let Misha celebrate Hanukkah with the family because he isn't Jewish, but this year, Mr. Milgrom makes a point of including him—implying his belief that if Misha has helped shoulder the family's burdens all this time, he should get to share their celebrations, too. The festival of Hanukkah commemorates events that took place in Judea around the year 165 B.C.E., when a rebellious Jewish group known as the Maccabees resisted the oppressions of King Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Though Hanukkah is a relatively minor Jewish festival, its symbolism is especially appropriate for the situation in the Warsaw ghetto, as a hopelessly outnumbered minority fights for their dignity under an oppressive regime. It represents resilience and survival in the face of dehumanization, and Misha's inclusion shows how important he's been to the Milgroms' survival.

"And so Hanukkah is eight days when we remember that time, and we remember to be happy and proud to be Jews and that we will always survive. This is our time. We celebrate ourselves. We must be happy now. We must never forget how to be happy. Never forget."

Related Characters: Mr. Tobiasz Milgrom (speaker), Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of Mr. Milgrom's explanation to Misha of the meaning of Hanukkah. The Jewish people, he explains, must always take pride in their identity and remember joy, especially when outside forces are trying to destroy those very things. The celebration is a kind of defiance of everything that's going on around them. Even though the Milgrom family doesn't have enough food or sufficient candlelight to last the full eight nights of the festival, they will still sing, dance, and pray together. Mr. Milgrom's point is that it's up to them to remember who they are when the Nazi regime tries to dehumanize them—it's the only kind of victory that's available to them. If they allow themselves to be completely crushed, then the Nazi strategy will have worked. The celebration also reinforces something that Misha instinctively understands: that resilience and happiness largely come from within a person and are not finally dependent on their external circumstances.

Chapter 35 Quotes

I smacked her. I shouted at her. But I could not change her. I could not understand her moods, her outbursts. I mostly accepted the world as I found it. She did not. She smacked me back and kicked me. In time I found my own best way to deal with her. On many days I went off to a favorite bomb crater and lowered myself into it and licked traces of fat from between my fingers and closed my eyes and remembered the good old days when ladies walked from bakeries with bulging bags of bread.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Mr. Tobiasz Milgrom , Janina Milgrom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Misha and Janina are very different people: Misha adapts to the world around him, while Janina resists it. This difference becomes especially apparent once Janina starts joining Misha on his smuggling trips. Misha is uncomfortable with Janina tagging along, since he knows he can't ensure her safety as well as his own, and her father doesn't like her being in danger. Janina is an unwelcome intrusion in the only world Misha has known and thus a kind of threat to his identity as a solo smuggler—yet she's also his adoptive sister, so he ultimately puts up with it for family's sake. Misha and Janina also represent two different kinds of resilience and survival, each with its strengths and

weaknesses: while Misha tends to go with the flow and adjust accordingly, this potentially makes him more accepting of his environment than he should be. And while Janina's angry outbursts make her a conspicuous target and cause problems for people around her, she's also primed to fight injustices, whatever the cost.

Chapter 39 Quotes

❝ Then I saw her. [...] She was a shadow cut loose, held above the other shadows by a pair of Jackboot arms. She was thrashing and screaming above the silent masses. [...] And then the arms came forward and she was flying, Janina was flying over the shadow heads and the dogs and soldiers, her arms and legs turning slowly. She seemed so light, so right for the air [...] I thought she would sail forever like a milkweed puff on an endless breeze, and I was running and wishing I could fly with her, and then she was gone, swallowed by the black maw of the boxcar[.]

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Janina Milgrom

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

When trains come to the Warsaw ghetto and begin transporting people to concentration camps, Misha, forewarned by Uri, is prepared to resist. He manages to avoid getting swept onto the trains by the crowd, but Janina, fascinated by the trains, gets separated from him in the crush of people. In the end, it's too late for Misha to rescue her. However, Misha's last sight of Janina captures her strongest characteristics. When she's grabbed by a soldier, she resists to the last moment, and as she disappears into the boxcar, her flight reminds Misha of the grace and innocence of the milkweed seeds that Janina had admired in the ghetto. Because he never sees Janina again—she and her family are assumed to have died in the camps along with so many others—this sight haunts Misha for the rest of his life. Misha later keeps a milkweed plant in his yard as a reminder of Janina's scrappy endurance as well as his belief that her soul "[sails] forever" and couldn't be swallowed up by her tragic fate.

❝ The Jackboot flung me against a wall. I saw his hand go to his holster. I saw the gun come out and point between my eyes. "Die, piglet!" *The voice.* I looked up. The red hair. The face. "Uri!" I cried, and the gun went off.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Uri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of the book's climax: before Misha can catch up with Janina and probably be taken to the camps with her, he's stopped by one of the Nazi soldiers. Just before the Jackboot shoots Misha, he has a stunning moment of recognition—the soldier is Uri. Up until now, Uri has come and gone in the ghetto, and his life outside its walls remains mysterious. When and why Uri became a Nazi soldier is never revealed. In fact, little about Uri's past is ever made clear, except that he's able to pass easily as being non-Jewish, and as the war goes on, he has a much greater awareness of the threats to Misha and his Jewish friends than they do. At this moment, his long-ago warning—that he'd have to kill Misha in order to keep him alive—seems to be fulfilled. However, Misha survives being shot in the ear, and much later, he understands that Uri was trying to spare him a likely death in a concentration camp. Although the mystery of Uri is never explained, this moment paradoxically demonstrates that he really did love Misha and was trying to do the best he could for him under terrible circumstances.

Chapter 42 Quotes

❝ The man placed his foot on my chest. "You're a Jew," he said.

"Yes," I answered. I pointed to my armband. "See?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm following the train. Janina. I'm going to the ovens."

"What ovens?"

"The ovens for the Jews. I'm a filthy son of Abraham. They forgot me. Can you take me to the ovens?"

The man spit in the weeds. "I don't know what you're talking about. You make no sense. Are you insane?"

Related Characters: The farmer, Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Uri, Janina Milgrom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

After Uri shoots Misha to save him from being deported to a concentration camp, Misha stumbles off down the railroad track, vaguely hoping to catch up with the trains and reunite with Janina. Eventually, sick and starving, he's stopped by a Polish farmer who ends up taking him in for the remainder of the war. His initial exchange with the farmer is touching—albeit in a dark way—both because of Misha's enduring innocence and because of his evident love for Janina. Though Misha claims he's Jewish, he isn't really—his basis for identifying as Jewish is his love for the Milgrom family, nothing more. Because of that, he wants to be included in everything his family faces—whether it's being denigrated as "filthy" by the Nazi regime or even killed. All he cares about is being with Janina through it all. As genuine as Misha's love is, it's also clear that he has no idea what "the ovens" really are, or just how terrible a fate he's been spared, showing that despite everything he lived through in the ghetto, he retains his childlike innocence. Given his repeated demonstrations of love for the Milgroms, it's easy to believe that, even if he *did* know what waited at the other end of the train journey, he would still have chosen to go with them.

Chapter 44 Quotes

❝ You were the thing that gave me shape. "But I wasn't even listening," you say. "I don't even remember you." Don't feel bad. The important thing was not that you listened, but that I talked. I can see that now. I was born into craziness. When the whole world turned crazy, I was ready for it. That's how I survived. And when the craziness was over, where did that leave me? On the street comer, that's where, running my mouth, spilling myself. And I needed you there. You were the bottle I poured myself into.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

This quote sums up Misha's experience after emigrating to the United States. As an adult, Misha struggles with his traumatic memories of the war and has a hard time maintaining jobs and relationships as a result. Often, he winds up standing on street corners, telling story after story of his experiences during the war. Here, he addresses his audience of listeners over the years: most of these people, he knows, dismissed him as crazy and don't even remember his stories. Misha accepts that, however. In his view, his whole life has been marked by "craziness," meaning that when the war turned everything crazy, it was easy for him to adapt and survive. But now that the world has moved on, Misha is left struggling with the chaos of his internal world. His audience rescued him from this to a degree, giving him an outlet for his memories whether they chose to listen or not, and thereby letting him maintain a fragile sense of his identity. This quote sums up the pain of post-World War II life for many survivors, showing that resilience doesn't always look as carefree as it did in Misha's boyhood.

Chapter 45 Quotes

❝ I think of all the voices that have told me who I have been, the names I've had. Call me thief. Call me stupid. [...] I don't care. Empty-handed victims once told me who I was. Then Uri told me. Then an armband. Then an immigration officer. And now this little girl in my lap, this little girl whose call silences the tramping Jackboots. Her voice will be the last. [...] I am . . . Poppynoodle.

Related Characters: Stopthief / Misha Pilsudski (speaker), Janina Milgrom, Wendy Janina, Uri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

This final passage of *Milkweed* sums up Misha's story—a story of being named and identified by others. The succession of names, and people who gave the names, allows the reader to see how Misha's identity has changed and matured along with his relationships. As a little boy, he was named after his external traits and behaviors (like being called "Stopthief" by the victims of his thefts as a street orphan). When Uri took him in, Misha gained his first name and a family history, although these were purely fictitious. As he became part of the Milgrom family, Misha was identified as one of them on the basis of their shared affection and experiences of suffering. Now, Misha is named "Poppynoodle" by the granddaughter with whom he's finally been reunited. At last, Misha has a known biological family. While this does bring the story full circle, giving his granddaughter the middle name "Janina" also shows that his past family, the Milgroms, remains just as much a part of him

even though they are long gone and were never truly related to him. The list of names suggests that, to some extent, people's various identities are always a reflection of their relationships with others, but that the most enduring ones are those based on mutual love.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The first thing Stopthief remembers is running, clutching a loaf of bread to his chest. Someone is chasing him, shouting, "Stop! Thief!" Sometimes, this memory comes to him as a dream in the middle of the day. He never sees who's chasing him, and he never remembers eating the bread.

Running and stealing are central to Stopthief's identity—to the extent that he's actually named after these activities. Though it's not yet clear why he engages in this behavior, the fact that the novel begins with this vignette indicates that it's foundational to Stopthief's sense of self.

CHAPTER 2

Someone with red hair is dragging Stopthief while running. Sirens are screaming. The redhead warns Stopthief that soon, he'll have to worry about being chased by "Jackboots," not by ladies. He pulls a loaf of bread out of Stopthief's shirt and splits it, handing half over. He'd been about to steal this bread from the same lady, he says.

The identity of Stopthief's rescuer is unclear, except that the redhead is a fellow thief, and he seems to be savvier than Stopthief. "Jackboots" is a nickname for Nazi soldiers, a reference to their knee-high boots and an allusion to the soldiers' authoritarian behavior—establishing the story's World War II setting.

There are thumping sounds in the distance. When Stopthief asks what the sounds are, his new friend explains that it's "Jackboot artillery," big guns shelling Warsaw. He identifies himself as Uri and asks Stopthief's name, but Stopthief doesn't understand the question at first.

The story is set just before the German invasion of Warsaw, Poland in September 1939. Stopthief seems to be oblivious to these events, suggesting that he's naïve about recent political developments. In fact, he doesn't even seem to have much of a sense of personal identity, acting puzzled when Uri asks his name. Others see him only as a thief, and that's how he thinks of himself too.

CHAPTER 3

Uri takes Stopthief to a stable, where a group of boys is living there with the horses. One of the kids, smoking a cigar, asks Uri why he didn't steal Stopthief's bread. Uri isn't sure. Somebody else calls Stopthief a "runt," and everyone laughs at his size. Stopthief sees a huge pile of stockpiled food—bread, sausages, candies—and assorted other things too, like watches, combs, and fur garments.

Stopthief, whose life has revolved around stealing, is introduced to a community of boys with similar experiences, suggesting that in Warsaw at this time, ingenuity in acquiring food is a matter of daily survival. Uri seems to feel an attachment to Stopthief, though he can't yet explain why.

When the kids ask Stopthief's name and hear the answer, they all laugh. One boy blows smoke at Stopthief and asks him if he's "cuckoo." When Stopthief doesn't know how to respond, the kid predicts that he's stupid and will get the rest of them in trouble. But Uri points out that he's quick and little.

Stopthief is unsure how to fit in with other kids his age—even those who are outcasts like himself. But Uri sees potential in Stopthief that the others don't yet see, especially the traits that will help him survive in a hostile environment.

The same boy asks Stopthief if he's a Jew, but Stopthief doesn't know; he doesn't know how old he is, either. After more mockery and horseplay among the boys, Stopthief asks what a "Jew" is. A kid points to himself, to the other boys, and to a bug in the straw, saying that all these are "Jews"—a Jew is someone who's "less than a bug." The other kids clap and cheer in agreement at this.

Though Stopthief appears to be innocent of such things, anti-Semitic views are pervasive in Warsaw at the cusp of World War II. In fact, such views were so extreme and dehumanizing that a Jewish person being described as "less than a bug" wouldn't have been out of the ordinary. The other boys have no doubt about the way their society views them.

The kids speculate that Stopthief must be Jewish, too, and that "he's in for it." But they won't tell him what he's "in for." They ask him about a yellow stone he wears on a string around his neck, but Stopthief doesn't remember where he got it—he's always worn it. The kids decide that he must be a "Gypsy," and the word sounds familiar to Stopthief.

At the time, "Gypsy" was an ethnic description for the Roma people who lived throughout Europe, having originated in Northern India centuries before. Today, "Gypsy" is considered a slur. Like Jewish people, Roma people were targeted by the Nazi regime and were discriminated against and executed en masse. Stopthief's familiarity with the word "Gypsy" hints that the boys' guess about his ethnicity is correct.

The boys joke that Jews are hated even more than "Gypsies," but their playful fight is interrupted by the return of the stableman. Stopthief and Uri run outside into the city, which echoes with artillery explosions. Uri leads Stopthief through back alleys and into the cellar of a brick building. Uri has a bed, radio, and icebox in the cozy cellar. As they share supper, Stopthief asks again what he's "in for," but Uri just tells him to eat.

As war breaks out in Warsaw, life there is riddled with danger and requires strong survival instincts. Uri, with his unexpectedly cozy home in the midst of a war zone, appears to be just the person to help Stopthief navigate this dangerous world. It's notable that none of the other stable boys live here with him—Uri seems to have especially protective feelings toward naïve young Stopthief.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, Uri brings home a mattress for Stopthief to sleep on. Then, he takes Stopthief out into the city. He goes into a store and emerges with an armload of clothes for Stopthief, and then he leads Stopthief into a bombed-out building. Uri fills a manikin's leg with water from a broken pipe and scrubs Stopthief so fiercely that Stopthief whimpers in pain—it's his first bath ever. After Stopthief dresses in his new clothes, he feels like a new person. Back home, Uri takes Stopthief upstairs to what was once a barbershop and gives Stopthief his first haircut.

Uri assumes a fatherly role toward Stopthief—giving him a place to sleep, dressing, bathing, and grooming the younger boy. To do these things, Uri makes use of the resources at hand, even if that means stealing and adapting materials from a bombed-out building. Receiving such attention makes Stopthief feel like a new person, suggesting that he's never been cared for like this before and that he's thriving in response.

Outside, Stopthief and Uri see people rushing around with shovels and sandbags. Uri explains that they're digging trenches in an attempt to stop the tanks. He and Stopthief jump on the outside of a streetcar and hang onto the window bars as it rattles down the track. One of the boys from the stable, Kuba, is running down the track carrying a lamp. They watch as Kuba drops the lamp and gets chased and cursed at. Uri calls Kuba stupid and warns Stopthief only to take what he needs. After Uri pinches his nose, Stopthief agrees.

Ironically, Uri has a code of ethics for stealing—one that frowns upon taking more than one needs. Kuba's plight suggests that when someone selfishly takes more than they need, they're more likely to get themselves into trouble. Uri's harshness toward Stopthief also hints that his paternal care of the boy isn't entirely tender, introducing a troubling dynamic in their relationship.

The other passengers, no longer distracted by the chase, tell Uri and Stopthief to get off—a lady in furs even shuts the window on Uri's fingers. Before she can do the same to Stopthief, though, there's an explosion on the track ahead of them; the streetcar stops, and everyone flees. After Stopthief releases Uri's fingers from the window, Uri runs to the driver's seat. He figures out the controls, and soon they're careening through the smoking, deserted city. Eventually, Uri smashes the streetcar into a restaurant, howling with delight. Stopthief keeps laughing and ringing the streetcar's bell.

Uri and Stopthief have a special bonding experience as they steal the streetcar and share a wild ride through the city while everyone else is hiding from the bombs. This is a madcap example of the orphan boys' ability to adapt to their environment, making use of what's at hand not just to get by, but to enjoy life. It's also an example of how that the orphan boys live a kind of parallel existence to the rest of their society, rejected from using public resources like the streetcar.

CHAPTER 5

Soon, airplanes start dropping bombs on Warsaw. Stopthief and Uri stay in their basement during the day, only venturing outside at night to see the rooftops on fire. On some nights, they walk into empty shops and take whatever they like. Sometimes, they join the other orphans in the stable to wrestle and share food.

Stopthief and Uri adapt to their environment further: paradoxically, the chaos of war has made the struggle for survival easier on them in certain respects, shielding them from getting caught.

One day, the sirens stop. Uri takes Stopthief outside, where they find people hurrying down the street. Stopthief can't help but run—and as he does so, he senses a deep rumbling in the earth and hears a beating like thousands of drums. When he reaches the front of the crowd, he sees endless lines of black, shiny boots. He realizes these are the "Jackboots" he's heard Uri speak about.

Warsaw has fallen to the Germans at this point, and the Nazi soldiers are marching in to occupy the city. So far, to Stopthief, this is just another adventure—he doesn't understand what the Nazi takeover means for the city or himself.

Stopthief is spellbound by the high-stepping boots and the men wearing them. At one point, a smiling soldier pulls Stopthief to his feet and greets him as a "tiny little Jew." Stopthief corrects him, holding up his necklace and explaining that he's a "Gypsy." The soldier seems delighted by this. Then, his smile vanishing, he salutes and rejoins the parade.

Stopthief innocently regards his ethnic identity as a simple fact about himself that he wants this stranger to get right; he's unable to see anything ominous in the soldier's smile. In reality, being a "Gypsy," a Roma person, was little better in the eyes of the Nazi regime than being Jewish.

Eventually, Uri joins Stopthief. Stopthief doesn't know why neither Uri nor anyone else in the crowd cheers for the Jackboots. Soon, huge gray tanks roar down the street, and Stopthief can see that stopping the tanks with sandbags was a silly idea.

Stopthief regards the arrival of the Nazi occupation as a parade—something exciting to celebrate, so he doesn't understand the somber mood of the rest of the crowd. His childish view heightens the ominous sense of what's about to befall Warsaw—especially the city's more vulnerable people, like Stopthief himself.

CHAPTER 6

The next morning, Stopthief and Uri go outside, where they see soldiers tossing bread from the back of a truck while people scramble to catch loaves for themselves. Stopthief never knew that bread could just be given away. Though Uri tries to stop him, Stopthief also approaches a crowd that's gathered around an old man whom soldiers are forcing to scrub the sidewalk using his long gray beard. Stopthief doesn't understand why. They see another group of soldiers cutting off another man's hair and beard. Stopthief tells the soldiers to bring the man to their barbershop, and Uri pulls Stopthief away as the soldiers laugh.

Stealing has been so central to Stopthief's identity and his experience of daily survival that he's surprised by the idea that bread could be available for the taking. More shocking, though, is Stopthief's first exposure to overt Nazi cruelty: the soldiers are targeting observant Jewish men by denigrating their hairstyles. But Stopthief doesn't yet understand what's happening—innocent of the soldiers' intent, he tries to be helpful.

Back at home, Uri warns Stopthief to stay away from Jackboots. Stopthief thinks that the Jackboots like him; he tells Uri that he wants to be a Jackboot himself someday. Uri smacks him for saying this.

The older Uri knows much better than Stopthief does what the Nazis' presence means—in Stopthief's eyes, the Jackboots are just impressive figures whom he hopes to emulate someday. He's innocent of any hostile intentions on their part, which Uri knows could leave Stopthief vulnerable.

That night, Uri wants to think up a real name for Stopthief. When he asks Stopthief about his family, Stopthief can't remember his parents. Uri once had a little brother, but he's probably dead. As Stopthief thinks back over what he's seen today—the man scrubbing the sidewalk, the soldiers cutting hair—he suddenly realizes that all the soldiers' victims were Jewish. Uri mocks him for being so slow to figure this out.

Uri, like Stopthief, comes from a background of loss. The likely death of a little brother is the only hint that's ever given about Uri's background, but it explains a lot about Uri's affection for and fierce protectiveness of Stopthief. Stopthief finally puts together what he's heard about Jews with what he's witnessed over the past few days, creating a small crack in his innocence.

CHAPTER 7

These are good times for Stopthief and Uri: their icebox is full of food. They eat candy all day—Stopthief's favorite is a chocolate buttercream with a hazelnut inside. Uri, meanwhile, is obsessed with fresh pickles. They both become experts at stealing their favorites—Uri from store shelves and Stopthief from people on the street. Uri is impressed by Stopthief's talent for thieving.

Stopthief and Uri continue life as usual for now, showing their resilience through their ability to steal the things they like best. Stopthief has an unusual aptitude for stealing that impresses even the older, more experienced Uri.

One day, Stopthief defies Uri's order to stay put and goes out thieving. He steals a box of cream puffs from a lady and then collides with one of the kids from the stable—Olek, a one-armed boy—as he's running away. Olek just stole some cherry turnovers; the two fling pastry filling at each other. After a Jackboot disrupts the boys' food fight, Stopthief runs and finds himself in someone's backyard garden, where two ripe tomatoes are dangling from a vine. As he sits down to eat one, he notices a little girl with curly hair and huge brown eyes watching him. She doesn't say anything. Stopthief looks over his shoulder at her as he walks away. The girl's gaze makes him feel visible for the first time.

The little girl's gaze, seeming to accept Stopthief for who he is, marks the first time Stopthief has felt acknowledged by somebody from outside of his own world. In the past, Stopthief's relationships with other people—especially those who aren't street orphans like himself—have mainly been a relationship between thief and victim. Though he's stealing from the girl too, this somehow feels different.

One day, Uri gives Stopthief a name and a history, naming him Misha Pilsudski. Misha, Uri says, was born into a family of Russian "Gypsies." His family, including two great-grandfathers and a great-great-grandmother who was 109, traveled in a big wagon caravan. His father traded horses, and his mother was a fortune teller. Misha had seven brothers and five sisters, and his favorite horse was a speckled mare named Greta.

Even though Uri's story is completely invented, it's the first time Stopthief has had a family and a past—even an imaginary one. The Roma people (here called "Gypsies," a term that's considered a slur today) often did travel in caravans, engaging in trades like horse dealing. Though somewhat fantastical, Uri's narrative is just realistic enough to be believed.

When Misha's family came to Poland, Uri goes on, their caravan was bombed by a Jackboot plane. The wagons scattered. One day, some Polish farmers who hated "Gypsies" kidnapped Misha and Greta. They forced Misha to work as their slave, until one day Misha escaped and fled to Warsaw, where he stole food on the streets in order to survive.

Uri provides a background story for how Stopthief—who will be called "Misha" from now on—wound up on the streets of Warsaw. The disdain of society for the Roma people is one element that rings true in Uri's account.

Thanks to Uri, Stopthief—now Misha—feels as though he is born for the first time in the autumn of 1939. He asks Uri about his yellow stone necklace, and Uri replies that it was a gift from Misha's father. Misha loves Uri's story and feels that he becomes the story. He stares at himself in the mirror and repeats his new name to himself. Soon, he wants to tell someone else his story.

Until now, Stopthief has always been identified by what he does—running and stealing. Now, for the first time, he has a story to call his own. For now, it doesn't matter to Misha that the story is fictional, as it gives him a sense of identity for the first time. His desire to tell his story suggests that a sense of identity is an important basis for connecting with others.

CHAPTER 8

When Misha returns to the backyard garden, the little girl is not there. Instead, he finds pieces of paper marked with arrows. He follows the arrows and digs up a wrapped chocolate candy. When he finishes eating it, the little girl is sitting on the step—she planted the piece of candy. Misha introduces himself and tells her about his family. The girl tells Misha it isn't nice to steal; Misha is fascinated by her shiny black shoes.

Misha soon has an opportunity to share his new name and story, seeking out the little girl whose attention had captivated him the other day. The little girl has apparently been waiting for him. She comes from a different world where stealing is simply regarded as not "nice" because it's unnecessary—establishing a stark contrast not just between her and Misha's lives.

Misha asks the girl if she's Jewish. She holds a finger to her lips and whispers that she is, but she isn't supposed to tell. She asks Misha how old he is, but he doesn't know. The girl stands in front of him and tries to guess Misha's age from their respective heights. She's turning seven tomorrow, so she guesses that Misha must be eight. She invites him to her birthday party the next day.

In her innocent way, the little girl signals that being Jewish is dangerous in this setting. Misha's lack of awareness of his background (he doesn't even know how old he is) doesn't stop the girl from finding a way to establish a friendship between the two of them.

When Misha returns the next day, the little girl angrily tells him that he's late—she refused to start the party without him. She pulls him inside, to a table laden with food and a beautiful cake. When a man lights the birthday candles, Misha is horrified. He blows out the candles, grabs the cake, and runs from the house. When he gets home and tells Uri, Uri laughs hysterically. He explains what birthday cakes are, and then the two of them split the crumbled cake. Uri tells Misha that its icing says, "Happy Birthday, Janina."

Unfamiliar with social norms, Misha doesn't understand what a birthday party involves—his instinctive theft of the cake being the clearest and funniest example of this. Misha's unfamiliarity with things like parties stems from his lifelong preoccupation with bare survival—as a street orphan, he's had no reason (or opportunity) to concern himself with the things other kids care about.

The next day Misha steals a beautiful cake from a bakery. He places it on the back steps of Janina's house, lights the candles, knocks, and runs.

Misha's gift of a cake (albeit stolen) is the story's first example of his generous character. Despite his previous moniker of Stopthief, that stealing is just a necessary means of survival for Misha rather than something he wants to do out of selfishness. He clearly cares about his budding friendship with Janina and wants to set things right.

Wandering the city later that day, Misha sees men carrying torches and thinks at first of birthday candles. In the window of the bakery he stole from, men are painting a big yellow star. When the owner comes outside, the men with the paint restrain him, taking off his clothes and painting him from head to toe with white and yellow paint while he struggles. The men with the paint all laugh and then send the man back inside. Misha sees the windows of other shops being shattered and another man tied to the back of a wandering horse.

Standing in stark contrast to the kindness and innocence of the birthday cake episode, Misha witnesses firsthand the cruelties of the Nazi occupation against the Jewish people of Warsaw. The Nazis are pointedly shaming and humiliating people and destroying their livelihoods, simply because of their Jewish identity. In his innocent mindset, Misha struggles to make sense of this brutality.

The next morning, Misha and Uri go outside and see Jewish shop owners repainting their windows, labeling their shops with the word "Jew." Misha says that he's glad he isn't a Jew, but Uri tells him, "Don't be too glad."

Misha's reaction to the frightening new world unfolding around him is simply to be glad that he isn't one of its targets—but Uri hints that this might not be the case for long. Uri's words also suggest that happiness over being "not Jewish" could eventually progress into anti-Jewish sentiments.

CHAPTER 9

One night, people break into the barbershop above the boys' cellar. Uri pulls Misha out into the night, and they run until they find a bombed-out building and then go to sleep in the rubble. In the following days, the boys wander the streets, sleeping in various cold places and stealing food where they can—although their lifestyle is becoming more difficult. One day, Misha steals a loaf of bread from a lady, and she calls him a "dirty Jew." When Misha corrects her, she starts calling him a "dirty Gypsy" instead and chases him down the street. Misha stomps on the woman's bread and calls her "dirty bread lady" before running away.

As the war's impact on Warsaw becomes heavier, Uri's and Misha's relatively carefree existence is disrupted too. They're forced to fend for themselves amid more challenging circumstances than before. Misha also feels targeted for his supposed Roma identity for the first time. Even though Misha's actual ethnicity is never completely certain, the point is that he genuinely identifies with it and feels the sting of another person's bigotry.

The next day, Misha steals five loaves of bread—each time, he shouts his name at the person he steals from. Uri scolds him for stealing more than he needs and says that they'll give the excess to the orphans. Uri explains that an "orphan" is a kid like the two of them, with no parents, but Misha reminds Uri that he isn't an orphan. The boys then go to a big stone house and ring the bell. A bald, bearded man answers. Uri calls him "Doctor Korczak" and gives him the bread. With a smile, the man thanks them and shuts the door.

Misha wants to be seen as a real person, not just as a "thief" or a "Gypsy"—hence yelling his name at his victims. Misha also doesn't identify himself as an orphan now that Uri has given him a background story. Even though he doesn't have a family right now, he takes his imagined identity quite literally, another indication of his innocence. Meanwhile, Doctor Korczak is based on a historical figure, Janusz Korczak, an educator who established a famous orphans' home in Warsaw.

The next day, Misha steals two loaves of bread and takes the extra to Janina's house. He puts the bread on the back step, rings the bell, and runs. When he checks the next day, the bread is gone. "That," Misha explains, "was how it started."

As the situation in Warsaw grows more dire, Misha—inspired by Uri's concern for the orphans—thinks of those he cares about. At this point, that is mainly his new friend Janina. His theft of bread for her lays the groundwork for the rest of the story, as such a gesture is likely to build a meaningful connection with Janina and her family.

CHAPTER 10

Misha tries to steal a loaf of bread for Janina every day. Janina starts leaving him small gifts in exchange—like a piece of candy or, one day, a tiny glass dog. After he receives the dog, Misha doubles back to Janina's house to speak to her. When he gets there, he finds a tall boy stuffing the bread into his coat. Misha chases him through the city, yelling, "Stop! Thief!" Finally, the boy turns and punches Misha, sending him into the gutter. Both the glass dog and one of Misha's teeth are broken. At home, as Uri tends Misha's wounds, he scolds him for fighting instead of running.

When Misha's stolen bread for Janina is stolen in turn, there's a striking role reversal—he finds himself in the role of a victimized accuser instead of the one who's pursued and accused. This is because Misha has never been in a position to be stolen from before—and in this case, it's not himself he's concerned about, but his friend, again showing his caring nature. Uri, however, is concerned that Misha's defensiveness will be an obstacle to his ability to survive.

The next time Misha goes to Janina's house, it's night. After he drops off the bread and starts walking down the street, he hears a pop, sees a flash of light, and feels something hit his ear—he realizes that somebody is shooting at him. When he gets home, crying, Uri says that Misha's earlobe has been shot off. A Jackboot shot him, Uri explains, because Misha was out after curfew. He smacks Misha for going out at night. To show Uri that he understands, Misha smacks himself too.

Warsaw is fast becoming a more dangerous place—even for children. The fact that conditions in the city have so quickly deteriorated, such that even children are being shot for defying curfew, foreshadows how much worse things will become. Meanwhile, Misha is loyal to Uri and completely trusting of him—having no memory of a parental figure's care, he doesn't question Uri's sometimes harsh treatment of him.

The next day, Uri ties a rope around Misha's wrist to teach him a lesson. When they meet the other orphan boys hanging out in a cemetery, they mock Misha good-naturedly. Then, they all smoke cigarettes—it's Misha's first. Pretty soon they're all wrestling, partly just to keep warm.

Uri humiliates Misha in front of the other orphan boys for running away, another example of his rather tough way of demonstrating love. Again, Misha doesn't resist it, indicating the sense of familial loyalty that he feels for Uri.

Eventually, during a game of hide-and-seek, the boys see a tombstone decorated with a big stone **angel**. Misha has never seen an angel before. Enos says that there's no such thing as angels; Olek says they're real, but they're invisible. They help people in trouble, he explains. Enos snorts at this idea and asks where the angels were when Olek got pushed in front of a train and lost his arm. Or why don't the angels give Big Henryk shoes? Or spare Jon from dying? Enos spits on the angel statue. Before they can finish this discussion, the kids are kicked out of the cemetery by a funeral procession.

Angel imagery is introduced as a symbol of hope transcending the darkness of everyday existence. However, the symbol is an ambivalent one. The orphan boys have suffered a variety of terrible experiences: dismemberment, deprivation, and illness, not to mention the daily reality of being homeless orphans. It's often difficult to reconcile these sufferings with the hope of something better, like the existence of protective, caring beings. Most of the boys have seldom known protection and care in their own lives.

That night, Misha asks Uri if Enos is right about **angels**. Uri says it's up to Misha—he's free to believe what he wants. Misha asks Uri if he believes in angels, but Uri just says that he believes in bread.

Uri just believes in filling his stomach, suggesting that he's primarily concerned with day-to-day survival rather than the afterlife. Importantly, though, he doesn't tell Misha what to believe, suggesting that determining one's beliefs is an element of personal identity.

CHAPTER 11

As time goes on, food becomes scarcer. Soon, Misha has trouble finding bread to snatch from people on the streets. Shops aren't much better, so Misha starts stealing from homes. He learns that he can often sneak into a fancy house on the heels of an unwary child because often, little kids just assume he belongs there. Thanks to his quick instincts, he once manages to steal a roast turkey from a dinner table before anyone can stop him.

Showing his ingenuity, Misha further adapts to his circumstances by finding other ways to get food. He may not be conventionally educated, but he is clever—he's highly observant of the world around him (not to mention bold), and he adjusts his behavior accordingly.

Soon, people also begin running out of coal. Uri steals a sack of coal one day and takes it to Doctor Korczak's orphans, calling it "black pearls." The next day, Misha goes scrounging for coal too. When he finally collects a full sack—getting caked with coal dust in the process—he brings it to the orphanage. Laughing, Doctor Korczak makes him come inside for a bath and gives him a new set of clothes.

Misha's capacity to care for other people is also developing, as he goes out of his way to help those who aren't in a position to help themselves. At first copying Uri, he also begins establishing his own relationship with Doctor Korczak and the orphans.

Doctor Korczak asks Misha his name and where he lives. When he asks Misha whether he's an orphan, Misha assures him that he isn't. He tells Doctor Korczak about his family, repeating the whole story Uri gave him. Before Misha leaves, Doctor Korczak has all the orphans thank him in unison. Misha, uncomfortable, doesn't know what to say.

Misha's personal identity continues to be bound up with the fictional identity Uri gave him, even to the extent that he denies something about himself that's undeniably true (that he's an orphan). For now, in other words, reality and imagination are somewhat conflated in Misha's mind.

CHAPTER 12

Misha keeps delivering coal to the orphans. He also brings Janina coal and bread whenever he can. One day, when he knocks on Janina's back door, a German soldier answers. Misha doesn't understand what the soldier is saying, but when Misha tells the soldier that he's a "Gypsy," the man slaps him and dumps beer on his head. Misha brings the heavy sack of coal down onto the soldier's stockinged foot and runs.

Janina's family has been displaced by the German occupation. Even when Misha is treated in a degrading fashion because of his self-identification as Roma (again showing how much this fictionalized past means to him), he quickly adapts to the situation by getting back at the soldier.

Misha and Uri sleep in the stable with the other orphan boys. When they walk through the city, Uri strictly instructs Misha not to do anything to draw attention to himself and to ensure that he doesn't look guilty. Once, concentrating hard on not looking guilty, Misha wanders right into the street and gets bumped by a car. He isn't hurt, but Uri is furious. He drags Misha into an alley and punches him, telling him, "Someday I'm going to have to kill you to keep you alive." Misha is sure he'll never disobey Uri again.

Uri's protectiveness of Misha takes a disturbing turn sometimes, as illustrated here, when Uri responds to Misha's mistake with fury and punishment. Misha also desperately wants to please Uri, showing how much Uri's care has meant to him (and also how vulnerable this desperation to please makes him). Uri's remark, "Someday I'm going to have to kill you," foreshadows the possibility that this troubling dynamic will grow even more violent.

CHAPTER 13

Misha's resolve to obey Uri doesn't last very long, because he sees the carousel horses. The carousel is in a park near the orphans' home; Misha is enchanted by the colorfully decorated horses moving in a circle to cheery music. He's never seen such a thing before. But when he starts moving toward the carousel, Uri stops him, saying, "It's not for you." Misha laughs—he thinks everything is for him. But then Uri squeezes Misha's neck until he can't breathe, showing that he means what he says.

Misha's innocence is displayed by the fact that he's always taken for granted that if something is available for the taking, it's as good as his. He doesn't understand Uri's implication that, as a poor, homeless, minority kid, the carousel doesn't belong to his world. Unlike Misha, Uri knows that crossing the boundaries of those worlds—the privileged and impoverished worlds—comes with a cost.

Misha can't resist visiting the carousel whenever he's alone. One day, he jumps onto a black horse with golden tassels and golden hooves. But he doesn't have a ticket, so the attendant throws him into the snow. But even when the other children kick him and throw snow at him for being a "dirty Gypsy," that doesn't stop Misha from sneaking back the next day to watch from a distance. He visits the carousel again and again. Once, he asks Doctor Korczak why the orphans don't ride the carousel—is it because they're Jews? Doctor Korczak has been watching the orphans with a fatherly smile. Now he turns to Misha in surprise, saying, "They're *children*."

For Misha, the carousel symbolizes the beauty of a world that's out of his reach as a street orphan presumed to belong to an unwanted minority group. Misha, trying to make sense of this baffling difference in worlds, talks to Doctor Korczak about it. But Doctor Korczak is so accustomed to thinking of his orphans simply as "children" that he's taken aback by Misha's innocent categorization of them as "Jews." Doctor Korczak's unspoken meaning is that human beings cannot be reduced to simple categories.

One night, Misha sneaks out of the stable, thinking he hears the carousel music. Sure enough, the city's intermittent electricity came on in the middle of the night, and the empty carousel is running. Misha spends hours riding horse after horse, laughing the whole time. Then, dizzy, he stumbles to the orphans' home and tells Doctor Korczak to bring the children. Doctor Korczak shakes Misha, calling him "foolish, good-hearted boy." He puts Misha to bed.

This passage is one of the novel's foremost examples of Misha's innocence. For one of very few times in his life, he gets to participate in a carefree, childlike activity. Yet there's a darker side too—he has to do this in the middle of the night for fear of being caught by the authorities (and Doctor Korczak is far more aware of the danger than he is).

The next morning, Uri comes to take Misha home. Misha expects Uri to smack him or call him stupid, but he does nothing. His silence makes Misha lose the desire to ride the horses, though not the desire to look out at the carousel.

Misha has come to associate Uri's rough handling of him with affection, a further reminder of the fact that Misha has no memory of any other kind of parental treatment.

CHAPTER 14

One day, later that winter, a crowd is gathered around the merry-go-round. When Misha reaches the front of the crowd, he sees that one of the horses is missing—only three of its hooves are left behind. It was his favorite black horse. Before long, people are yelling, "Find the Jew!" Misha thinks he might have yelled too. At the edge of the crowd, a couple of Jackboots are calmly smoking.

This chilling passage shows how group mentality can help to perpetuate oppressive treatment of minorities. At this stage, the Nazi soldiers don't have to do anything to stir up hatred, as civilians channel their anger toward the minority population they already hate. In response to the theft of his beloved horse, Misha, too, finds himself getting swept up in the hateful fury.

Later, the Jackboots find a victim: it's a Jewish man, and as Misha will learn, one Jewish person is as good as another in the Jackboots' eyes. They tie up the man with ropes and spray him with a huge hose while the crowds watch. By the time Misha walks away, the man is turning blue. Misha doesn't return to the carousel until the spring. There's no sign of the stolen horse, and the cheerful music and laughing children go on just as before.

The Nazi soldiers choose a Jewish man to serve as their scapegoat for the disappearance of the carousel horse despite the lack of evidence that the man is in anyway connected to the theft. This unjust punishment is a way of terrorizing the Jewish community, sending the message that anyone can be blamed for anything at any time. In the aftermath, the city silently ignores what happened, but Misha doesn't forget.

CHAPTER 15

Misha stands on a street corner, watching crowds of Jewish people walking past—he knows they're Jewish because they have to wear white armbands with a blue star. The people are quietly carrying their ragged belongings with them. Uri explains that the people are going to the ghetto. In their wake, people fight over the houses and buildings the Jewish residents left behind them.

By the end of 1939, Jewish people in Warsaw were required to wear armbands identifying them as Jewish, and by the autumn of 1940, they were forced to live within an enclosed, guarded ghetto. Misha, himself technically an outsider, watches from afar.

Misha decides to walk with the Jews. He's always wanted to be in a parade, so he marches with his head held high, goose-stepping. Nobody reacts. He tries to strike up conversation with various people and even offers them bites of the sausage he's carrying, but nobody will talk to him. He finds Doctor Korczak marching and singing with his orphans. When Misha asks if the ghetto is wonderful, Doctor Korczak smiles and tells him, "We will make it wonderful."

Though Misha's decision to march alone is touching, he's doing it out of a desire to have fun and not to be left out, not out of a conscious decision to identify with Warsaw's Jews. This is yet another example of his kindness and innocence (despite his imitation of the Nazi marching style, the only kind he knows). Meanwhile, Doctor Korczak's and the orphans' determined singing is an example of resilience in the face of oppression.

Then, Misha spots Janina walking with her family. He makes Janina laugh by telling her about the Nazi living in her old house, whose foot he smashed with the bag of coal. He tells her that nobody in this crowd can see him, and Janina's father says that it's because everyone is afraid of him. Misha thinks this is silly, but Janina points out that it's because Misha isn't a Jew.

Despite his innocence, Misha isn't oblivious to his surroundings; he's aware that nobody in the crowd seems willing to speak to him. In this environment, anybody who's not Jewish must be considered a potential threat to one's safety—Nazi oppression erodes everyone's trust in one another.

Misha offers his sausage to Janina's family, and though her mother protests, Janina, her father, and her Uncle Shepsel finally finish it off. Misha and Janina keep chatting cheerfully. Janina's mother isn't pleased about "the thief" hanging around them, but Janina's father lets it go. By now, they're nearly at the ghetto, and people are starting to run.

Misha begins to befriend Janina's family, the first step toward finding a family for himself. However, some people, like Janina's mother, still see Misha simply as a thief—not as an individual. In the ghetto, people will be forced to fight for living space, hence the urgency to get there first.

CHAPTER 16

Later that day, Misha tells Uri about the closet-sized room in which Janina's family is living. Uncle Shepsel had rushed up the stairs of a house and planted himself in a fourth-floor doorway to claim it. They'd taken turns guarding the room while family members took turns carrying their belongings up. Before Misha left, Janina surprised him with half a buttercream chocolate she'd saved for him.

War can dehumanize people in many ways, one of which is by turning them against one another—like forcing them to fight for inadequate living space. Janina's gift to Misha suggests that small kindnesses will be key to survival and to retaining one's humanity in this harsh world.

When Misha returns to the ghetto, men are building a brick wall around its perimeter. He steps over an unfinished section, ignoring people's yells. He goes to the house where the Milgroms are living and presents them with a sack full of food he's stolen. While the others eat, Mrs. Milgrom returns to her mattress in a corner, lamenting her lack of an oven. Misha explains to them that he simply stepped over the wall—because of his size, he can go anywhere.

Misha has always gone wherever he wanted; he's never believed that the rules governing normal society apply to him. So the same holds true in the ghetto—helped by his size, he innocently assumes that he can come and go as he wishes. He adapts to challenging circumstances once again, and this time, he tries to help his new friends, not just himself.

Somebody knocks on the door. A man comes in with a piece of paper. Mr. Milgrom takes the paper, opens a chest with lots of small drawers, and gives the man something in an envelope. The man looks as if he might cry, but Mr. Milgrom refuses payment. After the man leaves, Mr. Milgrom tells an indignant Uncle Shepsel that he was simply doing his job. Janina explains to Misha that her father is a pharmacist, but Misha doesn't even know what medicine is.

Mr. Milgrom's way of doing business in the ghetto—in this case, showing kindness by refusing payment from a vulnerable customer—is another example of adapting to changed circumstances in order to survive. Not everyone sees it this way, however: Uncle Shepsel's disapproval indicates that he's a character who looks out for himself and fears being taken advantage of.

After listening to Mr. Milgrom's exchange with the customer, Misha goes over everyone's names: Tobiasz Milgrom, Janina Milgrom. Happily, he adds that he is Misha Pilsudski. Uncle Shepsel glares at the children as they laugh and clap. Misha feels delighted to have his own last name *and* to know somebody else's.

In spite of the suffering and oppression all around him, Misha delights in knowing and connecting with others. Not only does he have an identity now, but he is becoming more aware of others' identities—in other words, he's developing a capacity for relationships.

CHAPTER 17

Uri and Misha's stable is crowded with street kids— now that the city's Jewish population has been moved to the ghetto, the orphans can't blend into the crowds as easily. When Misha says he's glad he isn't a Jew, Enos laughs bitterly and points out that the ghetto is for "Gypsies," too. One morning, the stable is invaded by Jackboots. They shoot one boy and march everybody else to the ghetto. The ghetto's wall has been completed and is now topped with broken glass and barbed wire. Misha has never been kept out of a place before, and he takes this as a personal challenge.

Misha still has a simplistic and relatively innocent outlook on the Nazi occupation. He thinks that as long as he's not Jewish, he's safe—he doesn't have a sense of the ideology underlying Nazi policies, which includes hatred of people in other minority categories, like so-called "Gypsies" (a term for the Roma people that's now considered an ethnic slur). The street orphans, despite lacking official records, aren't exempt from being forced into the ghetto.

When the boys are marched to the ghetto, Uri isn't with them—he's been missing a lot lately, sometimes for several days. Before he leaves, he always threatens Misha. Misha is actually careful to behave in Uri's absence, feeling more free to act silly when Uri is around.

From now on, Uri appears in the story more intermittently without explanation—yet he retains an authoritative hold over Misha. Though Uri can be heavy-handed toward Misha, Misha continues to feel loved and protected by him.

Inside the ghetto, Misha runs to the Milgroms' apartment. Janina's parents aren't home, since they both have to work jobs outside the ghetto walls. Janina and Misha run down to the street. To Misha, the ghetto looks similar to the main part of Warsaw—crowds of people, often selling things. They spot Olek and Jon, and Misha introduces them to Janina. Misha is surprised to hear himself introducing Janina as his sister. He doesn't know why.

To Misha, moving into the ghetto isn't a big deal. He still takes for granted that he can come and go as he pleases, and for now, life inside looks pretty similar to what he knew on the main streets of Warsaw. By introducing Janina to his orphan friends, Misha gets to connect these worlds. He feels an instinctive sibling bond with his new friend—perhaps a desire to lay claim to the family he's never had before.

They spot a knot of children fighting over a potato, and Misha explains to Janina that those kids are "unlucky orphans" who roam the streets alone. Janina asks if Jon, whom she just met, is an unlucky orphan. Misha says he isn't—"he's a lucky one. He's with us."

Even as an orphan, Misha has recently found companionship, and even a sense of family, among other orphans. Those who lack such family are defenseless and must fend for themselves. In Misha's eyes, even someone hopelessly sick, like Jon, is "lucky" by comparison.

CHAPTER 18

By the following day, Uri finds Misha and the other orphan boys in the ghetto. Misha asks Uri if he has a work permit that lets him go outside the ghetto wall, but Uri just says, "Don't ask."

The sense of mystery surrounding Uri grows—he obviously has a life outside the ghetto, but he doesn't want the other orphans to know about it.

One day, Misha sees a boy sleeping in the middle of the sidewalk, covered with a newspaper. Uri tells Misha the boy is dead. He could have died from cold, or starvation, or a disease like typhus. Soon, Misha notices bodies everywhere. He wonders who covers the bodies with newspaper and takes them away, and he decides that it must be **angels**.

Historically, life in the ghetto was filled with disease, malnutrition, and other deadly conditions. Misha, however, still views death through relatively innocent eyes: he doesn't recognize it at first, and then he's sure that heavenly beings care for those who die. As things in the ghetto worsen, Misha's innocent outlook will be tested more and more.

CHAPTER 19

The orphan boys sleep in the rubble with only a braided rug to cover them; they huddle like kittens. Sometimes Uri joins them, but often he's not there. The boys talk in the night, often about mothers. Ferdi says he doesn't believe in mothers—real ones, he says, don't die. They also talk about oranges—like many of the boys, Misha has never tasted one. Ferdi says that oranges don't exist, either. Misha finds it's easier to believe in things like mothers and oranges during the day than during the night.

Like angels, mothers and oranges are debatable subjects for the orphan boys—many of them have no more experience of maternal love or fresh fruit than they do of supernatural beings. The closest thing to family that most of the boys have known is the makeshift family they've cobbled together with one another.

During the day, the orphans mostly go their separate ways. None of them have armbands or other identification, and as a group, they're a target for the ghetto police, known as the Flops. And they're all hungry—nobody walks down the street with bread, and the few shops are nearly bare. In the outdoor market, horse and dog meat are sold. There are also "squirrels" for sale, but it becomes apparent that the small roasted animals aren't squirrels at all, but rats.

Inside the ghetto, survival becomes an entirely different matter than what Misha has known before. There are opponents and obstacles he hasn't had to deal with before (the Flops), and unlike the streets of the city, there's nobody to steal from, because nobody has anything. Misha will once again need to adapt and find new modes of survival.

One day, Misha snatches an extra roasted rat and takes it to the Milgroms' apartment. Uncle Shepsel greedily takes half, and Janina saves the other half to share with her parents. But when they get home, Mr. Milgrom and Mrs. Milgrom refuse to eat rat—not yet. Janina starts to cry and gives the remaining half to Uncle Shepsel.

Besides the fact that a rat would probably be considered unclean according to religious food laws, eating a rat also seems to symbolize a lowering of standards that the Milgroms aren't ready to accept yet. They're holding onto their dignity as best they can in an environment that's trying to diminish it in every possible way.

The next day, Misha walks along the ghetto wall, searching. Finally, he spots a gap in the bricks: it's only two bricks wide, a drainage hole, and he realizes it has never occurred to anyone that a person could fit through. He returns after dark and easily squeezes through the gap.

Prompted by his friends' hunger and driven by his unflappable kindness, Misha once again uses his ingenuity to find a way out of a situation—and again, he shows how kindness can . Used to going unnoticed, he finds a route that has gone overlooked by everyone else.

CHAPTER 20

The only food Misha manages to steal on the other side of the wall is a jar of pickled herring. He eats a piece and gives the rest to the Milgroms. Janina studies her piece of herring with wonder and then savors it slowly. No sooner have the Milgroms eaten than there's the sound of a machine gun and orders being screamed. Uncle Shepsel yells in terror, but Mr. Milgrom calmly hands Misha an extra armband and guides the family into the chaos outside.

Misha has the satisfaction of helping the family he's growing to love. However, their happiness is short-lived as they're interrupted by terror outside. Since Misha's lack of an armband would raise questions, Mr. Milgrom provides one for him, showing that he's already developing a sense of fatherly protectiveness for the boy.

Outside, screaming Nazis force all the residents to line up in the courtyard under bright lights. It's snowing. Mr. Milgrom whispers to them to stand at attention. Misha thinks that with his armband, he is Jewish now too. He listens to the soldiers' shouts, but he can't understand much besides words like "dirty" and "filthy."

Outdoor, all-night lineups like these were a common tactic for terrorizing ghetto residents. Despite the awful circumstances, Misha feels included in something bigger than himself for the first time. Even the soldiers' dehumanizing words don't destroy his willingness to be identified with the Milgroms and their community.

As they hear screams and the sounds of people being struck, Mr. Milgrom reminds Misha to remain at attention. Misha takes it as a challenge, intending to give the best attention ever. The Jackboots continue to scream at people and club them. Misha feels briefly proud when the soldiers pass him by. He resists the urge to call, "Hey, look at me!"

Misha's reaction is an example of the subtle dehumanization that could occur in an oppressive place like the ghetto. As a young, naïve child, Misha wants the Nazis' approval for his ability to comply with their arbitrary commands, not realizing the deeper implications of the situations.

They're forced to remain at attention for so long that people start falling over; the ones who don't fall over have a pile of snow on their heads. Misha feels the snow on his head and holds even more still, not wanting it to fall off. He pictures himself as a stone cemetery **angel**. Then he faints, but Mr. Milgrom hauls him to his feet before the soldiers notice.

The people who are able to successfully comply with the soldiers' commands are clearly distinguishable from those who cannot. On one hand, this allows Misha to turn the ordeal into an innocent game. On the other hand, this also turns the situation into something subtly divisive.

Finally, at dawn, the soldiers let them go. Everyone stampedes back to the buildings and either rushes to the bathrooms or collapses on their beds. When Misha wakes up later that day, he hears Uncle Shepsel ask why Misha is allowed to sleep with them—he isn't family. Mr. Milgrom replies, "He is now."

Having survived the lineup alongside the family, Misha is now considered to be part of the family. In other words, suffering together is one aspect of what constitutes a family.

CHAPTER 21

One day, Jon dies. The other orphan boys stand around his body, debating what to do with his shoes. Uri says they should be given to Big Henryk, who has never worn shoes, just coin bags. He puts Jon's shoes on Big Henryk and twists the boy's ears until he promises to keep wearing the shoes. As they walk away, Misha asks if an **angel** will take Jon's body. Enos sarcastically says that the angel is coming right now—a skinny horse is pulling a wagon down the street with two men. The men grab Jon's body and toss it onto the wagon.

After surviving on the streets for so long, witnessing death, and living without shoes, the boys almost take Jon's long-expected death in stride—the biggest debate is how to dispose of his shoes. But Misha finally sees what happens to the dead bodies often left on the ghetto's streets—his innocent imagination must give way to reality in this case.

As the kids walk down the street, making jokes about heaven, a Flop starts bothering them. Flops are Jewish guards hired by the Nazis; they carry whistles and long clubs. This Flop yells at the kids about their lack of armbands. The boys scatter, but Big Henryk gets caught. Then, Uri grabs the Flop from behind and hits him with his own club, sending him wobbling. The kids find this hilarious and take turns hitting themselves in the head with the Flop's club until they wobble, too. Then they strip off the Flop's clothing and send him flying into a puddle.

The orphan kids find their own ways of surviving by letting off steam in the ghetto, even by provoking and abusing one of the Flops, who would be seen as traitors against their fellow Jews and therefore contemptible.

CHAPTER 22

The other boys tease Misha as "the family man" because he's started sleeping at the Milgroms' place sometimes. Misha no longer thinks about the story Uri told him about his past. He always knew deep down that the story of the wagon caravan and Greta the speckled mare wasn't true, and he doesn't miss it. He stops calling himself Pilsudski and goes by Milgrom instead. He also keeps the yellow stone he wears around his neck, sensing it's true that this was a gift from his father.

Now that Misha has found a place within a more conventional family structure, he no longer feels the need to hang onto the invented story bestowed upon him by Uri. His new reality—the goodness of genuine, face-to-face relationships—eclipses the fantasy that served him for a time.

By this time, all the orphan boys spend their nights smuggling. Early one morning, as they lounge around sharing a cigar, they discuss the rumor that Himmler is visiting the ghetto soon. Kuba explains to Misha that Himmler is the Nazis' second-in-command. Later that day, Misha shares this news with the Milgroms. Janina says she's going to kick Himmler.

Under the Nazi regime, Heinrich Himmler was in charge of planning and implementing Europe's ghettos, concentration camps, and extermination of the Jews and other minorities.

Mrs. Milgrom has become very sick and weak, and she no longer works during the day. Uncle Shepsel resents it whenever Misha shows up without food, but Mr. Milgrom is kind to him, always affectionately touching Misha's head or shoulder when he talks to him. Today, he tells Misha that he's a good boy. When Janina protests, Mr. Milgrom says that they're both wonderful in their own way, and he can't choose between them.

Though not all members of the Milgrom family warm up to Misha—Mrs. Milgrom is too sick, and Uncle Shepsel only looks out for himself—Misha thrives under Mr. Milgrom's fatherly attentions. It's significant that Mr. Milgrom says he can't choose between Misha and Janina, as this suggests that he doesn't view Misha any differently than he would a biological son. This is the first time that Misha known this kind of consistent care and affection.

CHAPTER 23

When people hear that Himmler is coming, they gather on the street. Misha runs down to see fancy cars parading down the street, but only the Flops pay attention. Misha starts calling to the men in the cars, asking them if they're Herr Himmler. Nobody responds, except for a scrawny man with thick glasses. Misha can't believe that's Himmler. He asks to see Himmler's boots, sure that they would be the most impressive boots of all—but then he's knocked down by a Flop's club.

Until now, Misha has had an idealized view of the Nazi soldiers, even believing that the soldiers will pay attention to an anonymous boy like him. Seeing Himmler's unimpressive appearance in real life begins to disillusion him, as does the Flop's brutal treatment.

The Flop holding the club is a fat man named Buffo, who's infamous in the ghetto. He loves tormenting Jewish children by suffocating them in his huge belly. Since Buffo always chews mint leaves, a dead child's body always smells of mint after Buffo kills them. Though Buffo hates Misha most of all, Misha can't help teasing him, calling him Fatman and running away. But today, Buffo pins Misha's foot with his boot and laughs. Misha finally manages to free himself and get away. Later, he and the other boys laugh about the close call, but Uri smacks him hard and warns him not to bait Buffo.

Some cruel people in the ghetto relish the opportunity to exercise power, even when that means oppressing those who are powerless and ignoring the fact that they're members of the same oppressed group as those they're tormenting. Misha regards Buffo as just another person to outsmart on the streets, but Uri knows there's much more at stake in this instance, hence his harsh response to Misha's lightheartedness.

CHAPTER 24

Misha continues smuggling food for Doctor Korczak's orphans. Doctor Korczak urges Misha to "find the cow": as the desperation for food and milk grows, everyone claims to have heard the cow mooing somewhere in the ghetto. As Misha and Janina squabble over the cow's existence, Uncle Shepsel says that there is no cow. He's been studying a book about becoming a Lutheran, claiming that if he's no longer a Jew, he'll be allowed to leave the ghetto.

Uncle Shepsel has never seemed to identify himself very strongly with the rest of the Milgrom family or with the suffering of his fellow Jews. Regardless of how sincere his interest in Lutheranism is, it's unsurprising that he would have few qualms about finding a way to escape, even if it means leaving his family behind.

Once, when the orphan boys are joking around about the cow's existence, Misha speaks up about Himmler. He says he can't believe that the man who looked like a chicken could possibly be Himmler, but Uri tells him that it was. Then Misha starts losing respect for Jackboots and decides that he no longer wants to be one.

Misha is gradually realizing that reality quite often conflicts with the fantasies he's constructed in his mind—like that of the Nazis as respectable soldiers. In this regard, his experience of the war erodes his innocence a bit more, but it also strengthens his ability to survive.

CHAPTER 25

Janina no longer has hair bows or socks, and her shiny black shoes are just scraps. She cries and screams at her mother a lot, but Mrs. Milgrom doesn't get up from her mattress nowadays. Janina and Misha spend a lot of time picking lice from each other's hair, and Misha is good at making her laugh. In return, Janina throws Misha's things over the ghetto wall and goads him into chasing her.

Each character has his or her own way of surviving the deprivations and indignities of the ghetto: Janina often responds by lashing out and misbehaving, Mrs. Milgrom seems to wither, and Misha tries to cheer up his adoptive sister. Each method is an adaptive strategy in its own way.

One night, after everyone else is asleep, Misha sneaks out of bed. Just before he squeezes through the gap in the wall, he's shocked to discover that Janina has followed him. At first, he refuses to let her follow him, but she says he has to—he's her big brother. He smacks her, but she just smacks him back. Misha gives up and squeezes through the wall, with Janina at his heels.

Janina's determination to follow Misha is a turning point for them both. Sneaking and stealing has always been a major part of Misha's identity, but now being a brother is as well. Janina's desire to join him in smuggling causes those parts of himself to collide in an unexpected way, forcing him to adapt.

CHAPTER 26

Misha is uncomfortable with Janina coming along on his smuggling run, but he can't stop her from following him. He heads off through the city, which is alive with bright colors and cheerful sounds, in contrast to the grayness of the ghetto. He does his best to act invisible, as Uri taught him. He goes to his favorite place, a Jackboot hotel. Around back, Misha pushes open one of the windows and squeezes through headfirst. Janina tumbles down behind him.

Misha is used to straddling different worlds—his family of orphans and the Milgrom family, for example, and the ghetto and the city. Now, Janina inserts himself into the midst of his smuggling life outside the ghetto, forcing Misha to consider her safety as well as his own.

Misha starts making his usual rounds of the hotel's food cellar, filling a sack with things like vegetables, bread, and dried fish, and finishing by treating himself to a canned peach. When he refuses to share with Janina, she starts screaming, so he hastily shoves a peach in her mouth. However, her screams were enough to alert someone upstairs—the cellar door opens, and someone calls, "Hello?" At last, the person leaves, and Misha and Janina squeeze back through the window.

Janina's presence makes Misha's smuggling routine much more difficult—she doesn't have a sense of the risks involved and isn't used to having to act invisible. Misha has to summon all his resourcefulness to keep the two of them safe.

Back in the ghetto, Misha heads to Doctor Korczak's orphanage as usual—he always dumps half the food through an open window. Janina protests that Misha is supposed to feed *her* family, but Misha tells her that he feeds who he wants to feed. Then, he heads home.

Janina has only seen Misha as a provider for her family and feels possessive of him in this regard. Misha resents her intrusion in his work, perhaps because it causes different worlds to collide even more.

CHAPTER 27

The next day, Misha finds the orphan boys playing a new game. Big Henryk is holding Kuba upside down while Ferdi wallops his behind with a large bone, sending clouds of lice flying from Kuba's hair. Misha takes a turn—Ferdi stuffs a book down Misha's pants for protection, and Kuba starts hitting him with the bone. Just then, Janina appears, kicking and punching Kuba. But when she realizes Kuba isn't hurting Misha, she wants her own turn, so she borrows Misha's pants (since she's wearing a dress) and yelps and laughs as Big Henryk holds her upside down while Kuba knocks out her lice.

Janina continues to show up in parts of Misha's life that had previously been off limits to her, both as his family member becoming part of the orphan world, and as a girl wanting to make herself at home in a group that's always been boys-only. Misha's life continues to become more complicated as his relationships with the Milgroms deepen.

The hilarity is interrupted when the kids notice four new people standing in the alley—two Jackboots with their well-dressed girlfriends. One of the Jackboots holds up a black object, and Misha thinks it's a weapon at first, until Enos explains that it's a camera, which Misha has never seen before. Janina, meanwhile, is dancing for the couples while they snap pictures, hold their noses, and laugh.

The Nazis' dehumanizing ideology comes through even in their off-duty hours, as they view the ghetto kids as objects of entertainment. Ironically, the formerly naïve Misha is the one who's beginning to recognize this, while Janina, who's been more sheltered, does not.

CHAPTER 28

Summer in the ghetto is filled with huge flies and squawking, carnivorous crows that land on human corpses. Every morning, there are bodies of people who've died from sickness or hunger for the wagon to pick up. Misha does everything he can to keep the Milgroms and Doctor Korczak's orphans from going hungry. Because of his speed, small size, and skill at theft, he is perfectly suited to this task.

After years of not really fitting in anywhere, Misha is finally discovering a sense of purpose, further shoring up his sense of identity. The very characteristics that people have mocked about Misha prove to be assets in the world of the ghetto—they not only enable him to survive, but to support others' survival.

Janina follows Misha every night when he goes out smuggling, though Misha tries to ignore her. They raid many fancy Warsaw houses. They're so comfortable in one house that they turn the kitchen light on, and they eat cookies and milk with the little boy who lives there—but they never return to that particular house.

Misha continues to tolerate Janina's tagging along when he goes out smuggling. Some of their strategies require flexibility—for instance, knowing when to avoid a house where their presence will likely become known to the owners.

One night, Misha and Janina return while a lineup is in progress. Up until this point, Mr. Milgrom didn't know Janina snuck out at night; he squeezes Janina's ear as she sneaks into line. A soldier is yelling through a bullhorn, warning that smugglers will be hung if they're caught. Later, Misha tries to convince Janina to stop smuggling, but she starts yelling, "Misha smuggles!" until he relents.

The Nazi authorities are well aware of the smuggling taking place outside the ghetto. Now that Misha is responsible for somebody else's safety (much as Uri used to be for his), he's much more aware of the risks involved, while Janina remains frustratingly innocent.

CHAPTER 29

That night, Misha and Janina go through the wall as usual, but they don't steal food. Misha shows Janina the merry-go-round and the cemetery **angel**—he tells her that every person has an angel inside them which comes out when they die. As Misha and Janina are returning to the ghetto, they see a man shooting a flamethrower into the sewer. Misha knows that his friends crawl through the sewers to go smuggling. Later, he thankfully finds them alive. They all realize that the Nazis are cracking down on smugglers.

Misha tries to protect Janina by avoiding smuggling. He introduces her to other parts of his world that are meaningful to him, showing that their sibling bond is deepening. At the same time, the cost of smuggling is becoming terrifyingly high. It's no longer the lighthearted game it had seemed to be when Misha was younger; now, it's life or death.

CHAPTER 30

Pretty soon, Misha and Janina are stealing food again. One day, they find Buffo punishing some boys who've stolen piles of onions. He and other Flops beat the boys mercilessly with their clubs, making a public example of them. Misha hopes that this incident has finally taught Janina a lesson. To make sure, he even tells Mr. Milgrom that Janina has been smuggling, explaining that he can't keep Janina safe. Mr. Milgrom looks so angry that Misha thinks he will hit his daughter, but he just says one fierce word: "No." Janina cries and huddles on the mattress with Mrs. Milgrom. That night, Misha goes outside the wall as usual, relishing his regained freedom.

Persistent hunger means that the kids can't refrain from smuggling for very long, no matter how risky it is. But, understandably, Misha cares about his adoptive sister and wants her to stop. Admittedly, he also seems to be simply tired of his little sister annoyingly tagging along. Either way, he takes the very brotherly step of tattling on her. Mr. Milgrom is protective of his daughter in a way that he isn't of Misha, perhaps because Misha has a lifetime of experience and knows what he's getting into, while Janina is much more sheltered.

The next day, Misha sees Janina mocking Buffo—a perfect imitation. Misha pushes Janina into an alley, unable to stand the thought of Buffo getting his hands on her. He throws stones and then moons Buffo to distract him from Janina. From then on, Misha stops baiting Buffo. He's tired of Janina imitating everything he does, and she's the one person he can't outrun or hide from.

Misha has always been able to outrun and wiggle out of any situation he didn't like. Now, he finds that family bonds can't be so easily escaped, as in the case of a pestering little sister whom he cares about.

That night, Misha returns from smuggling and finds that Janina has snuck out of the house anyway. In the morning, she has brought three potatoes and a pancake. From that point on, she keeps smuggling. She technically obeys her father by not smuggling with Misha—she just goes by herself. Occasionally, she and Misha bump into each other around the city. Mr. Milgrom always thanks Misha for the food he brings, as Janina never takes credit for it.

Against all appearances, Janina isn't just an annoying tagalong; having watched and learned from her brother, she, too, develops an aptitude for smuggling. And despite her somewhat abrasive, attention-seeking personality, she has learned enough not to flaunt this.

One day, after an unrewarding night of smuggling, Misha and Janina wake up from napping in an alley in the ghetto. Janina notices a brown seed with white fluff attached that's stuck to Misha's shirt: it's **milkweed**. Janina plays with the fluffy seed and then lets it sail through the air, calling it her **angel**. Soon, puffs of milkweed are flying all around them, coming from a plant that's growing amid the rubble.

Milkweed, in its ability to sprout up even amid rubble, represents resilience and survival in an unforgiving and seemingly barren environment. It also symbolizes the persistence of the human soul in spite of the crushing effects of such an atmosphere.

CHAPTER 31

One night as Misha makes a typical visit to the lobby of the Jackboot hotel, he's stunned to see Uri emptying ashtrays. Uri is dressed in a fine uniform, and he pretends not to hear Misha calling him. When Misha chases him down a hallway, Uri takes him into a dark room and squeezes him fiercely. He says that he has a job in the hotel laundry and that Misha must never call him "Uri." If Misha comes here again, Uri threatens to have him shot.

Uri has not been appearing regularly in the ghetto for a long while, and his parental role in Misha's life has been eclipsed by Mr. Milgrom's. His life outside the ghetto remains a mystery—clearly one he doesn't want Misha to know about. The fact that Uri is working in a Nazi hotel certainly brings his loyalties into question, though Misha is still too naïve to pick up on this.

Misha doesn't know what to make of the encounter, but he feels uncomfortable. After his smuggling rounds, he takes his time sneaking back through the hole, knowing that it's closely patrolled. A short time later, he finds Janina: her sack of food is spilled on the ground, and she's staring up at a body hanging from a streetlight crossbar. Misha wonders why she's frozen there—they've witnessed so much death in the ghetto before. Then, he looks up and sees that the person hanging is Olek.

Misha senses that there's more to Uri than he has suspected. But he's soon distracted by the horrifying fate of one of his orphan friends and fellow smugglers, conspicuously hung as a warning to the other kids. The Nazis didn't shrink from making examples of children in this way, and it's a grisly message to Misha and Janina—they know they could easily be next.

CHAPTER 32

The following day, Enos tells Misha (who can't read) that the sign that had hung around Olek's neck said, "I was a smuggler." The orphan kids sit in the rubble, not saying anything. The day after this, Misha visits the orphanage and sings a song with the children. Then, he wanders through the snow, singing his song.

Misha's visit to the orphanage is a kind of search for his innocence, which has taken a huge blow after Olek's death. He knows that Olek's fate could be his too, so he hangs onto whatever scrap of happiness he can in order to find resilience.

As Misha is walking around, he's surprised to see Uncle Shepsel, who rarely goes outside the apartment. He's smiling, and he playfully tousles Misha's hair. Then, as Uncle Shepsel's expression turns confused, he asks Misha, "Every night you go [...] Why do you come back?" Misha doesn't know what to say, and after a while, Uncle Shepsel wanders off.

Misha and Uncle Shepsel are opposites when it comes to their attitudes about family. Where Misha identifies with the Milgroms despite the fact that he doesn't have to, Uncle Shepsel is willing to abandon those he's actually related to. The years Misha spent as an orphan have likely made him more grateful than the average person to have an adoptive family that loves him—Misha's lonely childhood means that, unlike Uncle Shepsel, he now deeply values love and loyalty.

When Misha gets back to the Milgroms' room, he finds Janina crying in Mr. Milgrom's arms: Mrs. Milgrom has died. Misha had always wanted to call Mrs. Milgrom "Mother," but she never let him. Now, he calls Mr. Milgrom "Tata," and Mr. Milgrom embraces him, too. They sit up all night with Mrs. Milgrom's body.

Misha shares in Mr. Milgrom and Janina's sadness, further cementing his role within the family despite the fact that Mrs. Milgrom never completely accepted him the way that Mr. Milgrom has.

The next day, the undertaker comes. Mr. Milgrom pays him with a bottle of pills he's been saving for the occasion. The undertaker puts Mrs. Milgrom's body on a wagon, and they all walk slowly to the cemetery, where Mr. Milgrom pays the guard with another bottle of pills. Just as Mrs. Milgrom's body is being laid in the grave, bombs begin to fall on the other side of the wall. Everyone runs except the Milgroms. Mr. Milgrom tells Misha and Janina to cover their eyes, and he tucks them into the grave beside Mrs. Milgrom. As they huddle there, Janina pulls a **milkweed** pod from her pocket. She blows into it, and several puffs sail out of the grave and into the sky.

The sadness of life in the ghetto is quietly underscored by the tragic fact that Mr. Milgrom has been hoarding his pills to ensure that his wife could receive a proper burial. However, the family is denied a peaceful funeral by a fresh onslaught of violence. In the midst of this, Janina's milkweed symbolizes her belief in angels, the endurance of her mother's spirit, and the hope that life will endure even these darkest of circumstances.

CHAPTER 33

When they get home, Uncle Shepsel is dancing in the courtyard, saying the Russians are going to save them. Nobody else is celebrating. In the Milgroms' room, new ghetto residents have arrived, needing space. Mr. Milgrom lets them have the mattress. Meanwhile, Misha joins the orphan boys outside, where Enos is laughing as he stands on a pile of rubble. After everything that's been done to the Jews, he says, it's hilarious that they're getting bombed now, too. Nobody else laughs, though.

The ghetto is becoming more and more crowded, with no space for people to live full, dignified lives. People react in different ways to the mounting bleakness of the situation—some, like Uncle Shepsel, by denying it, and some, like Enos, by accepting it with a kind of bitter humor.

Conditions in the ghetto are growing worse: there are more orphans, roaming the streets and begging, but there's no food to give them. One day, Misha sees a Jackboot and his girlfriend tossing pieces of bread into the snow and laughing as people desperately pounce on the bread.

The Jackboots are indifferent to the suffering they inflict. In this case, they see their victims' hunger as a source of entertainment; they've long ceased to view them as human beings worthy of dignity and care.

Seven new people are crammed into the Milgroms' tiny apartment now, including twin little boys. The adults don't speak to Misha or Janina, but the little boys play with them. Janina is kind to them in return, leaving them pieces of food at night. One day, someone inexplicably throws cabbages, potatoes, and sausages over the ghetto wall. This happens several nights in a row, and each time, Misha and Janina joyfully collect a feast to bring home. But the flying food eventually stops.

Janina, despite her frequently spoiled attitude, is also capable of acts of kindness, as her treatment of the children shows. And life in the ghetto is marked by occasional, unexplained mercies like the appearance of food from the city beyond. Such things are never explained; they're just accepted and celebrated.

One day, the mysterious, sought-after cow appears in the ghetto—but it's galloping across a balcony while a laughing Jackboot attacks it with a flamethrower. The flaming cow finally sails off the balcony and lands in the courtyard. Moments later, it's mobbed by people.

The rumored cow finally appears, but in a wanton demonstration of cruelty, Nazi soldiers torment it—a symbolic act of crushing people's hopes.

CHAPTER 34

Last year, Mrs. Milgrom wouldn't let Misha celebrate Hanukkah with the family—but this year, Mr. Milgrom says that he will be included. Mr. Milgrom tells Misha the history of Hanukkah: how the Jewish people, many centuries ago, defeated their Greek oppressors despite being very outnumbered, and their limited oil supply miraculously lasted for eight nights. Mr. Milgrom explains that it's up to them, as Jews, to celebrate themselves and to never forget how to be happy.

Misha may not be ethnically Jewish, but Mr. Milgrom's inclusion of him in the Hanukkah celebration suggests that his membership in their family is what ultimately matters. His description of Hanukkah suggests that, no matter what people's external circumstances, they cannot allow their oppressors to rob them of their dignity.

Misha asks Mr. Milgrom—whom he now calls "Tata"—what "happy" means. Mr. Milgrom compares happiness to the taste of an orange, but Misha has never eaten one. Then, he compares it to being warm after having been cold—but he explains that happiness is inside a person. Misha looks at Janina sitting sadly on the floor. She hasn't been happy since the day of the burning cow.

To Mr. Milgrom, happiness is something that can't be dependent upon a person's external circumstances—rather, it must be cultivated from within. However, it's clear from Janina's despondency that one's situation can severely hamper a person's capacity to experience happiness.

As Mr. Milgrom takes a silver candleholder and lights the first of eight candles, the other residents stay on their side of the room. The little twins come to look, however. Even as they hear gunshots and screams in the street, Mr. Milgrom prays and sings over the flames. Then, he makes Misha, Janina, and the twins join him in dancing in a circle. Janina remains slumped and reluctant, but Misha imitates Mr. Milgrom's smile as best he can.

The family celebrates in defiance of the oppression, suffering, and sadness all around them. Their celebration reaffirms their bonds with one another, as well as reminding them of the fact that they cannot be reduced to mere victims, no matter what the Nazis inflict upon them.

Mr. Milgrom gives both children the gift of a new comb. Misha happily combs his tangled and lice-ridden hair, but Janina refuses to open her present, so Misha combs her hair for her. She doesn't smile, but she doesn't stop him.

Mr. Milgrom's gifts reaffirm that he acknowledges both children as equally his. Misha also tries to comfort his sister in the only way he can think of, again exhibiting kindness as a means of resisting the Nazis' dehumanization.

On the second day of Hanukkah, the candleholder has been stolen. Misha isn't surprised—he knows that the other family probably took it in order to trade it for money or food. Misha is used to the idea that "things exist to be stolen." Mr. Milgrom doesn't make a fuss about the theft; he lights a tiny candle stub and gives Misha the job of being the menorah. They and the twins sing songs, but Janina won't get up from the floor. Hanukkah continues in this way. Eventually, the candle burns away, so Mr. Milgrom says that their own hearts will be the flames.

From his own experiences, Misha understands what would motivate someone to steal, especially in desperate circumstances like these. Given that people in the ghetto often go without basic necessities like food, it makes sense that "things exist to be stolen" and traded or sold within this world. Mr. Milgrom refuses to be deterred by the loss of the candleholder—according to him, the real source of resilience and happiness lies within a person, not in material objects.

Janina stops going smuggling at night; she even stops complaining. Misha combs her hair for her every day, but he can't make her smile. Then, he has an idea to find Janina a pickled egg—her favorite. So, the night before the last day of Hanukkah, he goes on a mission. He finds some pickle spears in somebody's pantry, then finally finds one egg sitting on a shoemaker's workbench. He races home, dodging Jackboots at one point.

In the wake of her mother's death and the destruction of the cow, Janina's capacity for resilience is declining rapidly. Despite not knowing what a picked egg is, Misha's smuggling mission is an act of great love for his sister.

As Misha rushes home, he trips over a body hidden in the snow and cracks the egg—but the egg doesn't break. Misha thinks this is a miracle. When he gets home, he shows the egg and pickles to Mr. Milgrom, explaining that he wanted to make Janina happy. Mr. Milgrom looks at Misha for a long time. He says that the egg isn't the miracle—Misha is. When Janina wakes up, she doesn't care that Misha hasn't brought her a real pickled egg. Ecstatically, she savors the hard-boiled egg and then hugs Misha. As Misha falls asleep, he feels Janina combing his hair.

Misha's resourceful, daring act to bring Janina her favorite food restores her spirits and also demonstrates his brotherly devotion to her. From simply surviving on the streets to helping others avoid starvation, Misha has used his thieving skills in various ways—and now, his goal is just to make his sister happy.

CHAPTER 35

The Milgroms hear voices singing in the courtyard: it's a group of children singing at windows for food. They family has nothing to give the children. As winter turns to spring, bodies are left on the streets and more smugglers are hung. Sometimes, Misha can't find any food, just drippings of fat from the bottom of a garbage can.

Conditions in the ghetto are growing more dire than ever: Misha's inability to find more than drippings shows how desperate things have become. By this point in the war, the Warsaw ghetto was approaching a death toll of 83,000 people.

However, even as Janina grows thinner, she becomes more like her old self. She starts following Misha again, and she even starts harassing the Flops. Misha tries to stop her, but nothing helps. Misha has always accepted the world as he finds it, whereas Janina resists it. Sometimes, Misha retreats to his favorite bomb crater just to get away from her, licking traces of fat from his fingers and dreaming of the days when he stole loaves of bread from rich ladies.

Misha and Janina have different ways of responding to the terrible conditions that confront them. Misha has always found ways of dodging obstacles and working around them; Janina resents and confronts them. Neither way is presented as better than the other, as both children are doing the best they can to survive circumstances that threaten to crush their humanity.

CHAPTER 36

One day, Uri unexpectedly joins Misha in the ghetto. He smacks Misha to make sure he's listening and instructs him to get out of the ghetto, out of Warsaw. Misha notices that, unlike the ghetto kids, Misha has no scabs or boils, and he's wearing clothes and shoes. Uri explains that deportations are starting soon: the Nazis are clearing out the ghetto, taking the people away on trains. This sounds good to Misha, but Uri squeezes Misha's neck and warns him that he doesn't want to know where the trains are going. Whatever Misha does, Uri continues, he mustn't get on a train—he needs to keep running instead.

Uri is in conspicuously better shape than the sickly, poorly fed ghetto kids. He also has more information than they do, and despite his disappearance from Misha's life, he still cares enough to try to forewarn him. The trains are likely going to transport Jews to concentration camps, but Uri's news doesn't register with Misha—he thinks that the deportation trains sound like a means of escape, not a portent of something awful.

Uri tells Misha not to stop for anything—that he's not a Jew or a "Gypsy," he's *nobody*. He makes Misha repeat this. Then, he gives Misha a chocolate buttercream and walks away. Misha tells the orphan boys and his family about Uri's warning. Mr. Milgrom comforts Janina, assuring her that there won't be trains, and that there's nothing more the Nazis can do to them.

Uri's point in telling Misha that he's "nobody" is that this is the only hope Misha has to escape—to slip out under the radar. But Misha, who by this time has developed strong bonds with his friends and adoptive family, is no longer able to think in a self-centered way. Meanwhile, the rumors about deportation seem too ominous to be believed.

CHAPTER 37

Janina becomes obsessed with the idea of the trains. Early one summer morning, after a night of smuggling, she and Misha discover that the trains have pulled into the ghetto station. Before long, everyone is talking about them. Uncle Shepsel rants at people to become Lutherans like him and save themselves. Meanwhile, the orphans sing in the orphanage. Everyone waits.

Deportations to the Treblinka concentration camp began in the summer of 1942, with 265,000 Warsaw ghetto residents ultimately transported there. An awful suspense hangs over the ghetto, as people cling to whatever hope they can find.

Two nights later, the Jackboots begin herding people down the street with rifles and snarling dogs. Rumors about "resettlement" start to circulate—the idea that the Jews are being given their own villages in the East. One street at a time, day after day, the ghetto is emptied. One day, Mr. Milgrom urges Misha to stay close to Janina no matter what. Misha realizes that Mr. Milgrom knows Janina has continued smuggling, and that he's allowing this.

Misinformation about the trains' destination gives some people hope. However, Mr. Milgrom suspects that the children need to stick together in order to survive, even if it means that he might lose them.

Soon, even the orphan boys begin to disappear. Misha is never sure if they've run away, gotten caught and hung for smuggling, or killed by Buffo. One day, Doctor Korczak and his orphans are marched down the street. The orphans are well dressed, Doctor Korczak's head is held high, and they are all singing.

In the chaos, many people simply disappear forever—yet the prospect of death doesn't stop people like Doctor Korczak and his orphans from holding onto dignity and hope to the last. This proves Mr. Milgrom's earlier point that happiness and humanity are cultivated within, regardless of one's circumstances.

CHAPTER 38

One day, a barefoot old man appears in the ghetto. He says he has escaped, and that there is no resettlement—it's all a trick. Other people, citing postcards from relatives, shout at him that he's lying, but the man just wearily repeats his story. In a faint voice, he says something about ovens and people's ashes falling like snow. Nobody believes him.

Under the terrible circumstances in which people are already living, it's difficult for them to believe that things could get still worse, and they continue to cling to hope despite evidence to the contrary.

The next day, Mr. Milgrom tells Misha that when he and Janina go out smuggling that night, they must not come back—they must run and never come back. Misha realizes that the old man was telling the truth, and that this is why Mr. Milgrom no longer tried to stop Janina from going out at night.

Mr. Milgrom realizes that in order for the kids to survive, they will have to run away. He can't protect them himself, and their best chance for survival is to rely upon Misha's skill at escaping.

That night, Mr. Milgrom embraces the children for a long time. He is crying and whispering something that Misha doesn't understand. On the other side of the wall, when Misha takes Janina's hand and pulls her past their usual haunts, she plants her feet and refuses to go. When Misha tries to insist, Janina screams, kicks, and spits. When they return home, Mr. Milgrom is so furious that he shakes Misha, but then he hugs the kids again. It goes on like this for several more nights.

Janina characteristically resists being forced in any direction she doesn't want to go. Mr. Milgrom is pulled between his desire to cling to the children and his desire for them to escape to safety, suggesting that there's often a tension between the demands of survival and the bonds of love.

CHAPTER 39

One night, Misha and Janina can't get back inside the ghetto—their usual holes have been filled in. Janina grows agitated as they hear screams and gunshots on the other side. They spend the next day wandering through Warsaw, eating dried fish and trying to blend in. That night, Misha finds that they can get into the ghetto through the gate near the train station. But when they get back to the apartment, Mr. Milgrom and Uncle Shepsel are gone. Uncle Shepsel's book about Lutherans lies on the floor.

Finally, the threat of deportation reaches the Milgrom family—even Uncle Shepsel, despite his pretensions, isn't spared. The authorities seem to have finally caught on to Misha's paths in and out of the ghetto—but instead of using the opportunity to escape, Misha and Janina run straight back into the ghetto search of their family, again illustrating the unbearable tension created by the situation in the ghetto.

Janina runs toward the train station, and Misha loses sight of her in the throngs of people. He instinctively works backward through the crowds so that he doesn't get swept toward the trains. At last, he sees Janina—or he thinks that he does. He's never sure. He thinks he sees her shadowy figure being held by a pair of soldier's arms. She's thrashing and screaming, and then, as Misha runs toward her, she's flying through the air, into a boxcar. Misha thinks that she resembles a **milkweed** puff as she flies.

Misha is never completely sure what happens to Janina, but it seems as if her search for her father and her fascination with the trains thwarted any hopes of escape. She disappears in the same way that she lived: fighting and resisting. Misha's last sight of her epitomizes her resilience and her irrepressible spirit.

Misha tries to go after Janina, but a snarling dog stops him, and then he's kicked and clubbed to the ground. A Jackboot grabs him by the hair and flings him against the wall. He hears a familiar voice saying, "Die, piglet!" Then he sees red hair. As Misha cries, "Uri!" a gun goes off.

In the shocking climax of the story, Misha is stopped from pursuing Janina by a familiar face—Uri's tough love on display again. It seems he's been part of the German Army all this time, all the while still trying to keep Misha safe and distanced in spite of Uri's alliance with the Nazis.

CHAPTER 40

When Misha regains consciousness, he is hurting all over. His ear is ringing, and his arm is crusted with blood where the Jackboot dog shook him. When he touches his ear, there isn't much of it left. Then, suddenly, Misha remembers Janina—but the trains are gone, and the station is empty. He finds a scrap of a black shoe on the ground: Janina's. Still dizzy, Misha begins following the train tracks out of the station.

It seems that Uri shot Misha in the ear rather than giving him a more lethal wound, perhaps suggesting that Uri wanted to save Misha from deportation and used the gunshot as a distraction to do so. However, Misha's first instinct—despite his pain—is to pursue his sister, showing how deep the bond between them was.

CHAPTER 41

Eventually, Misha meets a healthy-looking boy along the track. The boy asks where Misha's ear is, and Misha explains that he's going "to the ovens," following the trains. When the boy asks if Misha is a Jew, Misha says yes. The boy brings Misha some water to drink, and Misha keeps walking.

Misha has heard rumors about cremation ovens at the concentration camps, but in a jarring example of his innocence, all the word "ovens" means to him is nearness to Janina. His instinct is to rejoin his family, no matter what.

Misha survives on berries, wild scallions, and ditch water. He sleeps in the weeds and often hallucinates, seeing Buffo, Uri, Himmler, Doctor Korczak's orphans, and Mr. Milgrom. He's used to Janina being there, copying everything he does, but now he can't find her. One day, he wakes up to see a man standing over him.

Misha is used to scrounging for survival, albeit in a much different setting. And now, bare survival is less important to him than reuniting with the family he loves—something he lacked at the beginning of the story.

CHAPTER 42

The man asks Misha if he's a Jew. Misha says yes, explaining that he's going to the ovens. The man thinks that Misha is insane, but he pulls Misha to his feet. He takes Misha home in a donkey cart and puts him a barn. The farmer's wife tends his wounded ear and feeds him. She scrubs him and brings him new clothes, burning the old ones. She checks on him every day.

At first, it looks as though Misha has been rescued, as he does receive the bare necessities of food, shelter, and medicine. But again, these things are no longer his top priorities—especially when he's separated from his family.

One day, when Misha's ear stops ringing, he walks off down the tracks. The farmer catches up with him and swats him when Misha repeats that he's going to the ovens. He takes Misha home and ties him to a post in the barn. Misha remembers Uri's old story that Misha had once been enslaved by farmers. Now, he wonders if that wasn't just made up—maybe he's just "catching up with [his] life." One day, the farmer's wife comes again and tells Misha that he mustn't run away; there's a new law that all children must work on the farms.

Misha has no idea what he's really saying when he repeats his desire to go "to the ovens." He doesn't know the horrific fate that awaits people in Treblinka and other concentration camps. All that matters to him is being with the Milgroms to the end. Instead, in an ironic twist, an aspect of Uri's backstory comes true for him as he's seemingly at the farmers' mercy for the remainder of the war.

CHAPTER 43

Misha works in the barn and in the fields. The farmer's wife, Elzbieta, feeds him with the pigs. He's tied to the post every night. Elzbieta warns him that if he runs away, the Nazis will burn down their farm, so Misha befriends the donkey and the barn mice and keeps waiting. One day, a man stops by the farm and speaks to the farmer. The farmer shouts in the house. That night, Misha wakes up to hear Elzbieta saying, "Run!" The rope is gone, and there's a loaf of bread tucked under his shirt.

It's not clear what the farmer's intentions ultimately are toward Misha, or what would have happened to him if he hadn't escaped. Regardless, Elzbieta shows him mercy, helping him flee his already dehumanizing conditions at the last minute. In a touch of irony, she makes sure that Misha won't have to steal his bread.

Misha spent three years on the farm. By now, the war is over, and thousands of people are trudging along the train tracks. People sell things in open-air markets; Misha finds these hucksters fascinating. He works for farmers and steals when he can't find work. He rides many trains, but he never finds Janina.

Misha joins crowds of displaced survivors who are struggling to make ends meet after the destruction of the war. Given the brutality of the concentration camps, it's likely that the Milgroms died before the end of the war.

One day, Misha winds up back in Warsaw. There's lots of rubble, and the ghetto wall has been knocked down—in fact, the entire ghetto is rubble. Misha hears about the uprising that took place in the ghetto after he left. The uprising failed, and the remaining Jews in the ghetto were put onto trains, too. As Misha looks at what's left of the ghetto, he finally understands what Uri saved him from.

In 1943, thousands of Jews remaining in the Warsaw ghetto succeeded in holding off the Nazis for several weeks before being defeated and deported. Seeing the destruction of the ghetto, Misha understands that Uri believed that by shooting him, he was sparing Misha from a worse fate—an act of love despite all appearances.

Misha goes back to stealing food on the streets. One day, he gets a whiff of mint. To his amazement, the smell is coming from a bony, ragged man. Misha tugs on the man's clothes, calling him "Fatman." He pulls his old armband out of his pocket and tells Buffo to kill him, but Buffo silently shuffles away.

Though it's unknown what happened to Buffo in the camps, he is clearly a shell of his former self and has lost any desire to victimize and torment people, suggesting that oppressors are ultimately robbed of their humanity, too.

CHAPTER 44

As the wider world returns to normal, Misha slowly learns how to function in mainstream society. But before long, he starts stealing things in the countryside and selling them for cheap prices. He also discovers his voice, which becomes more important to him than selling. He hawks just to hear himself speak. He loves the fact that words are free for the taking.

Misha defaults to stealing rather than making a mainstream living, because it's what comes most naturally to him. But he discovers that there's more to surviving than material sustenance. He's usually relied on other people to determine or shape his story; now, he wants to tell it himself.

Eventually, Misha saves up enough money to buy a ticket to America. The immigration officer doesn't recognize the name Misha, so he renames him Jack Milgrom. Misha learns English and takes jobs as a salesman. Between his accent, his mangled ear, and his small size, he can't get the best jobs as a traveling salesman. Instead, he sells things like vegetable choppers on the Atlantic City boardwalk. He's no good at selling, but he finds himself blurting out stories from the ghetto—stories about Himmler, burning cows, and merry-go-rounds. Every once in a while, someone stops to listen.

In America, Misha gets renamed once again and struggles to function within a world that doesn't have an obvious place for him. Telling stories about his survival in the ghetto becomes a way of coming to terms with those memories. Just as he once longed to tell Janina about his made-up history, now he longs to tell the truth about his past to whomever will listen—and even to those who won't.

Misha ends up fired from his sales job, but he returns to the boardwalk the next day. He keeps talking. He ends up traveling to Philadelphia, taking menial jobs so that he can keep up his real job, "running [his] mouth." Most people write Misha off as crazy. But then, one cold November day, a woman named Vivian stops and listens to him on a street corner. Soon, she comes every day and starts taking Misha to lunch or to her apartment. Finally, she says that she'll marry him, though Misha isn't sure he ever asked.

Misha's compulsive storytelling does enable him to form new bonds with other people. Some stop to listen, value his stories, and even validate him. Misha is even given the opportunity to start a new family with Vivian, which looks like a promising resolution to his wandering life.

The marriage only lasts for five months. Living with Misha is difficult: he slams the door on caroling children, takes cold showers until he's blue, steals fruit, has nightmares, and laughs and cries at inappropriate times. When Vivian finally leaves, Misha suspects that she's pregnant.

It turns out that a bond founded upon Misha's stories can't necessarily be sustained that way. Misha's worst memories of the war (like starving, singing children, people being tormented by frigid water, and other traumatic events) overshadow his ability to maintain relationships with people who didn't share such conditions.

Misha goes back to talking on street corners, spilling stories about everything that happened to him in Warsaw, often making little sense. He refers to his audience as "the thing that gave me shape." It doesn't matter if they didn't listen—the point is that he talks. It's was how he copes. He needs people, even if they didn't listen to his experiences.

Somehow, telling stories is what enables Misha to survive. He knows that other people can't really understand, but recounting his experiences "gives him shape," helping him make sense of his identity. After a lifetime of having his story determined by others, Misha needs to tell his own.

One day, outside City Hall in Philadelphia, two ladies in their seventies stop to listen to Misha. After a while, one of them reaches out and touches his ear. She smiles at him and says, "We hear you. It's enough. It's over." After that, Misha never talks on another street corner.

In a way, understanding isn't what Misha seems to need most—he just needs to be heard. The detail about the ladies' age suggests wisdom, meaning that they may understand World War II and empathize with Misha's experiences on a deeper level than younger people do. In any case, their affirmation sets Misha free from the need to keep talking.

CHAPTER 45

Misha hears a little girl screaming, "Poppynoodle!" He goes to see what she's doing this time. As Misha's granddaughter performs an awkward headstand, he thinks of Janina.

The story makes a surprising transition from loneliness to a newfound relationship. The past and present join as Misha's memories collide with his present.

Some time ago, Misha was stocking shelves in a Bag 'n Go market when a young woman approached him. She was holding the hand of a little girl. The woman said, "Daddy?" She introduced herself as his daughter, Katherine, and the little girl as his granddaughter, Wendy. Katherine has been searching for him forever. Wendy shakes Misha's hand.

Misha describes the background that led to his reunion with his granddaughter. It turns out he was correct in his suspicion that Vivian had been pregnant. After searching for family all his life, his own family improbably seeks him out.

Radiant, Katherine tells Misha that she's been saving something for him: she left Wendy's middle name blank on purpose because she wants Misha to give her one. Without even stopping to think, Misha says, "Janina." Katherine invites him to live with her and Wendy, so Misha drops his apron in the aisle and goes home with them.

Misha's memory of Janina joins with the present joy of his newfound granddaughter, suggesting that the family formed through shared suffering in the ghetto is, in its own way, just as real and important as the biological family he's formed in America. Wendy Janina is the living link.

Misha watches Wendy swing in the backyard. It's autumn, and the **milkweed** pods are bursting, though the plant doesn't change colors. One day, Misha asked Katherine to drive him out of town—he'd found some milkweed, the "**angel** plant," and taken it home to plant in a corner of their yard. Katherine doesn't ask any questions. Misha keeps Janina's story secret, too. He'll tell them someday.

Though Misha has never hesitated to tell his story, he refrains from sharing Janina's. In a way, telling Janina's story is a way of admitting its end. He prefers to focus on ways in which Janina lives on—through the evergreen milkweed plant, and through his lively granddaughter.

Wendy Janina wears herself out on the swing and climbs into Misha's lap on the rocking chair. He rocks and smiles, thinking of all the names he's had and the voices that gave them. He's been thief, "stupid," "Gypsy," "Jew," "one-eared Jack." He's been named by his victims, by Uri, by an immigration officer. But now, a little girl's voice has quieted the voices of Jackboots in his mind, and her voice will be the last. Now, he is Poppynoodle.

All his life, Misha's identity has been governed by others. Each of these names and identities had a degree of plausibility to it; they each captured aspects of himself and his story. Now, Wendy Janina gives him a name, too. But Wendy Janina love gives him peace as nothing else does, as her life sums up his own story, symbolizes a piece of Janina's survival, and suggests that childlike innocence can survive in spite of tragedy.

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